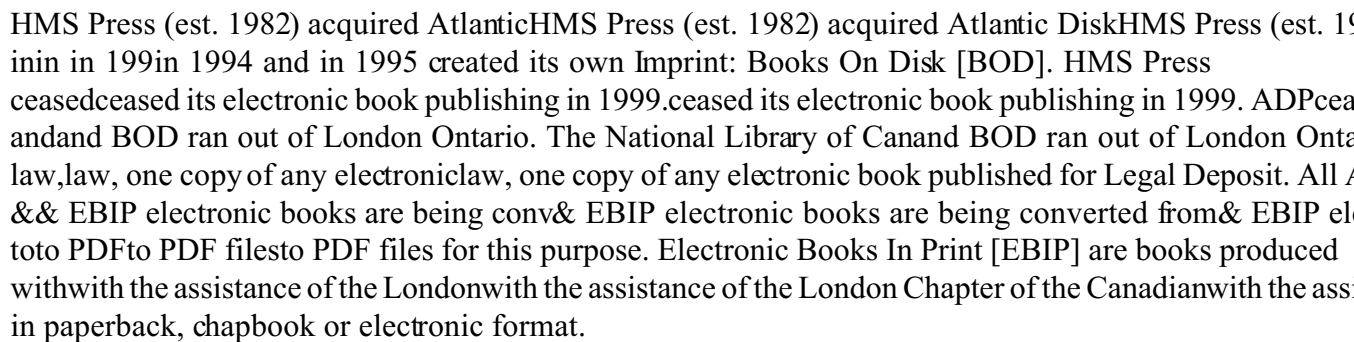


AA RAVENA RAVEN IN NEWA RAV

by

J. C. Clover-Cook



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A RAVEN IN NEW YORK CITY

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by J. C. Clover-Cook

PUFF, THE DYING DRAGON
LIVED IN DESPAIR
AS A RESULT OF ALL THE ACID RAIN
AND THE POLLUTION IN THE AIR

PUFF, THE DYING DRAGON
DIED IN DESPAIR
FROM SWIMMING IN SOME TOXIC WASTE
HE DIDN'T KNOW WAS THERE

PUFF, THE DYING DRAGON
SAID, BEFORE HE DIED
"I DON'T FEEL WELL, I THINK PERHAPS
THERE ARE TOXINS IN THE TIDE."

HIS ANIMAL FRIENDS, IN A STATE OF SHOCK
CRIED: "CAN IT REALLY BE?"
BUT THEN THEY SAW FOR THEMSELVES
THE SEWAGE IN THE SEA

HIS FRIENDS WERE OVERWHELMED WITH GRIEF
WHEN THEY READ PUFF'S EULOGY
"ALL BECAUSE OF SOME TOXIC WASTE
THAT WAS DUMPED INTO THE SEA."

"DON'T PUT HIS BODY IN A WOODEN BOX
MADE FROM THE TIMBER OF A TREE
WHY KILL ANOTHER LIVING THING
SIMPLY SET HIS SPIRIT FREE."

"STOP THE DESTRUCTION BEFORE IT'S TOO LATE
THE EARTH IS OUR ONLY HOME
EXTINCTION TOO WILL BE MAN'S FATE
GOOD BYE, PUFF," THE POEM.

RAVEN is a voracious reader, who dreams of becoming a famous writer, and by working hard, his friends say, "He has transformed himself into a Faulkner with feathers."

"And if you think that's bad," Raven himself says. "They also refer to me as 'the bird who always has his beak in a book.'"

"It's true," say his friends, "he talks to no end about Truman Capote, Tolstoy, Tennessee Williams, Hawthorne, Hemingway, Herman Melville, and many other authors, such as Steinbeck, the Bronte sisters, and the 'fabulous' F. Scott Fitzgerald."

It is five o'clock in the evening, and right now Raven as usual is in his study room writing in his notebook. He has been working since noon, but he ignores the ache in his neck and he continues to write: "Her name is Mona Babcock. She is my main character. She lives in the town of Raven Rock, and she is a murderess..."

Raven's study is on the second floor of the house that Raven has resided in for several years. The huge house that he calls, "Raven Manor" is at the end of Raven road. It, the house, is a hundred miles from the real town of Raven Rock. Several hundred miles from the city of Seattle it, the house, is a spectacular estate, even by the standards of a movie star. Surreptitiously situated by the shoreline of Washington State the house is on a high cliff overlooking the Pacific ocean and every animal that sees it says, "Splendid. Simply, splendid. No other house can compare to the regal Raven Manor."

"I hired a horde of beavers to help me build it," Raven quite often points out, this time to a pair of pigeons passing by.

There are no human beings between Raven Manor and the town of Raven Rock. For a hundred miles in any direction the only specimen of man is a monk who lives on a mountain top. His name is Leonardo.

"Leonardo is not a threat. He lives in harmony with Mother Nature," say all of the animals who know him.

Raven, who has a birds eye view from his study room window of the sea shore, is able to watch his relatives, other ravens, as they roost on the rocks. He does not spend his spare time, however, staring at the seashore, for in his study one will usually find him either reading or writing. Then every night just before dinner he goes downstairs to watch the evening news. "I like to keep myself abreast of what is going on in the world," he confesses to his wife Rebecca.

"I don't know why you watch the news when it upsets you so?" she says.

Rebecca is right. The news annoys Raven to no end, but like he says, "If I turn the TV off the woes of the world won't go away."

At seven o'clock Rebecca watches her husband return up the stairs to his study. She is not surprised, but she is tired of him spending so much of his time at that old typewriter. "Good grief," she has said to herself on several occasions. "There he goes again." At the time she does not know how serious Raven is about his writing. She believes it is just some kind of passing phase.

"Oh my," she remarks to herself now, as she stares at the calendar in her kitchen. "This weekend is Thanksgiving, which means all of Raven's relatives will be coming for dinner. This huge house will be filled with at least fifty birds all flapping and fluttering around, while I run all over the place like a chicken with my head chopped off cooking and cleaning, but, I like to keep my husband happy," she adds in regards to her self-imposed slavery.

At ten o'clock in the evening Raven returns from the Animal Food Store. He is carrying a bundle of groceries, most of which were on the long list given to him by Rebecca for their

upcoming Thanksgiving day dinner. It is raining outside and Raven is soaking wet when he comes into the kitchen. Dripping water all over Rebecca's clean floor he quickly dries himself off, sits down in the dining room where Rebecca is dusting, and then much to his wife's dismay, he announces, "I am going to write a book about human beings."

When Rebecca got married she had no idea about her husband's literary intentions. Sure he read more than most birds, but she never believed for a moment that he was serious when he said, "One day, my dear, I am going to write a book."

"The time has come for me to begin my book," Raven says to her now in their dimly lit dining room. "And it's going to be a best seller, and we're going to be rich, and famous, and perhaps, I will win a Pulitzer Prize?"

"I see," Rebecca rigidly replies, but no matter how hard she tries she is unable to keep herself from laughing at what she feels is her husband's foolery.

"What do you find so amusing, my dear?" Raven demands. His feathers are all in a fluster.

"Raven, we're already rich. And why do you want to be famous? You hate humans. The idea of a Pulitzer Prize being awarded to one of our kind is preposterous. And besides, what do you know about books and about human beings? Except for Leonardo there are no humans for a hundred miles."

"I've been reading and I've been researching the human race. I will write a book, and I will start right away," he replies.

"And what will it be about?" Rebecca wants to know, since she is sure she will have to make several sacrifices on behalf of the book.

"I'm not sure," Raven tells her, as he begins to preen his feathers, which are still slightly damp from the rain. "It may be a murder mystery? Or it might be a love story in which you, my dear, will indubitably star? Or I suppose I could write a science fiction fantasy filled with farce and adventure? Or an epic romance novel? Or perhaps a spy thriller? Or a horror story? Or maybe, quite possibly, I'll write a sequel to The Raven and call it The Human." He chuckles, and adds, "After all, if Edgar Allan Poe can write about a raven, why can't a raven write about a human?"

Having finished preening himself he fluffs his feathers and wait for Rebecca to respond. Rebecca, however, makes no reply, but the following day she is standing outside behind Raven Manor in the backyard beside the giant bird bath, which the beavers also built. Here, while putting her laundry up on the clothes line, she is talking to her best friend. "Ruth, can you keep a secret?"

"Of course, Rebecca, you know I can. I am very closed mouthed," Ruth replies, but not rightly so, for very rarely can Ruth keep a secret to herself. Even recipes given to Ruth in confidence have a way of getting into the competitor's kitchen.

"Raven is writing a book," whispers Rebecca.

"A book? But, he can't. It's not allowed," Ruth replies.

"I know it's not allowed. That's why it's a secret."

"Well, you know Raven he's such a romantic. Maybe it's just a passing phase?"

"I used to think so, but not anymore. He's been working in his study for several weeks now. He's up there almost every hour of the day and I'm beginning to worry."

"Is he up there now?" Ruth wonders aloud.

"Yes," replies Rebecca. "He hardly eats his dinner. He doesn't sleep. Not to mention, we never spend any quality time together. He used to be so attentive, but now it seems he has

nothing on his mind but writing a book. And you wouldn't believe me if I told you what it's going to be about."

"What?" Ruth is eager to learn.

Rebecca shakes her head in obvious disbelief. "Humans. He's writing a book about human beings."

"Oh my, oh my," Ruth exclaims and then she sees that the sun is on the verge of setting, so she says, "I'm sorry, Rebecca, but I have to go. Rabbit is supposed to meet me in the woods at sundown. We're going dancing tonight. Would you and Raven care to come?"

"I'd love to go, but I don't imagine I'll be able to drag Truman Capote away from his typewriter. I'll see you tomorrow," Rebecca says to her friend, and then alone she wonders, while watching Ruth disappear into the woods, if she should have told her?

Ruth nearly runs right into her husband Rabbit on the path that leads to their house. She is out of breath and gasping for air when she wildly exclaims, "You'll never believe what Rebecca just told me? Raven is writing a book."

"Nonsense. It's not allowed," Rabbit replies and then he and his wife hop away in a hurry with their noses turned up and their tails twitching.

"I wonder," Ruth begins, but she is having such a hard time keeping up with her husband she has to catch her breath once again. "I wonder, what Her Highness will have to say on the subject if she ever finds out about Raven writing a book?" she remarks to Rabbit, who remains several feet in front of her. Suddenly, though, Rabbit's four legs fly out from under him and he flips head first over a bush he believes was not there before. He is only slightly embarrassed, and by standing up, brushing a patch of dirt off his white coat, he condemns the mishap to the back of his mind and continues on course.

"I am sure that Mother Nature, or Her Highness as you like to call her, will find out soon enough," Rabbit says to his wife, who is now hopping alongside of him. Having said this Rabbit and Ruth both become very frightened for their friends Raven and Rebecca, for they remember the last time Mother Nature was upset in the Washington woods she willfully blew the top off Mount Saint Helens.

After Rebecca finishes hanging up the last of her laundry she goes into Raven Manor. "I do hope it doesn't rain again tonight," she tells Raven, who is in the kitchen contemplating (what could be any number of things) over a cup of chamomile tea. He looks extremely haggard. "You should rest," she tells him and the tone of her voice is very strict.

"Really, Rebecca, I'm not at all tired. It's just that my talons keep getting tangled in the typewriter keys. My beak is constantly being caught in the carriage return. My tail feathers are sore from so much sitting. But, no one ever said writing would be easy, so I won't complain. I just need to stretch my wings for a while."

Two days after the turmoil of their Thanksgiving day dinner, Raven comes running down the stairs rejuvenated and rejoicing. "I'm done. I'm done. Rebecca, dear, I'm done."

"Have you finished the book already?" Rebecca asks with her heart full of hope.

"Hardly, my dear, I dare say I'm done the prologue."

Now is not the time, Rebecca decides to express her fears relating to Mother Nature; but now is the time for me to reveal to you readers that Raven is a bird. And for those of you have never had the pleasure of becoming acquainted with the "quorking" call of a raven, brace yourselves, for the bird's book is about to begin.

PROLOGUE: THE PLANTS

"Surely, I need some sunlight," one plant said to another.

And, "I'm thirsty," said yet another.

"I want some water as well," cried the Cactus in the corner. "It's not like Mona to forget our watering day or to leave us alone for so long," the Cactus continued to complain.

"Not unless..." the Swedish Ivy started to say, but then she stopped herself, because she was scared, so scared in fact, she could barely keep her leaves from shaking.

"Not unless she's committed another murder, you mean," a six foot Philodendron, who was afraid of absolutely nothing finished for her; he was the oldest potted plant in the living room and he had been there for all of the murders. "She always becomes forgetful when planning a murder," he added.

"There's lots of light in here," the Spider plant called happily from the kitchen window sill, since he was the sole recipient of the sun that was shining outdoors.

"The last time she came home covered in blood and bitchy," the Rubber plant said to the Swedish Ivy, who had recently arrived, and was regarded by the rest as "the nervous newcomer." Moreover, she had never been around for any of the murders.

"I remember when she killed the lumberjack," the Geranium sighed.

"And I remember when she killed the farmer and the fisherman," the Fuchsia plant said.

"And those hunters," the Hibiscus plant added helpfully.

"I remember when she killed the florist," the Fern said.

An African Violet with lavender flowers in full bloom could speak French fluently. He had learned the language from the florist, who was the first man that Mona, his beloved mistress, had murdered. The African Violet had had an argument with Mona on the night of that murder, for he had actually been in the florist shop when the cold-blooded killing occurred.

"Don't do it," he had told her. "Mother Nature will be mad."

"But, it's because of Mother Nature that I am doing it," Mona claimed and she was tremendously calm for someone who was in the process of stabbing a store keeper over and over again with a pair of cutting shears.

The plants were delighted when they heard Mona's key in the front door, for the sound of that latch unlocking filled their apartment with the promise of plenty. "She's home," the English Ivy announced unnecessarily.

"Mona," they all called collectively when their mistress entered the room.

"We. We," said the African Violet, "I'm afraid I can smell blood."

"And death," declared the Rubber plant.

"Be quiet," whispered the wilted Wandering Jew that was hanging from the ceiling in a basket.

"Oh, stop your whining," the Sansevieria Snake plant snapped at the Wandering Jew.

"I'm home," Mona said when she came into the living room. She had clearly overheard their conversation while in the stairwell, and in the outer hallway she already knew what she was going to say upon entering her apartment, so she looked around the room at all her precious plants, giggled, and said, "Guilty as charged."

She threw open the venetian blinds that had been closed for the past two days. It was the middle of a summer's afternoon, so therefore sunlight flooded the room and fulfilled at least a portion of that plentiful promise. "Water," the Cactus cried.

"So," said the sometimes sarcastic Sansevieria Snake plant, "who did you kill this time?"

Then the whining of the Wandering Jew made the Snake plant snap some more, which in turn caused the Cactus to continue with his complaints for water.

"I'll give you all some water in a minute," Mona said.

"Come on. Don't keep us in suspense. Tell us, who did you kill?" the Philodendron asked.

"The Mayor," Mona said with a slight smile.

"You murdered the Mayor?" an astonished blooming Begonia exclaimed, even though she very seldom spoke.

"Oh, my God," the Hibiscus hollered.

"Mother Nature isn't the only one who's going to be mad. This time the whole town will be in a turmoil," the African Violet vowed.

"I don't want any of you to worry," Mona said reassuringly. "What's done is done," she added, and then she stripped off her clothes. "I have to jump in the shower, and by the way I'm sorry I was gone for so long," she told them before going into the bathroom to bathe.

"Two whole days," cried the cactus accusingly.

After a quick shower Mona watered the plants that were in need of the nutrient. The Cactus that very seldom drank more than a few drops demanded to be drowned. "Now, that's quite enough. You'll make yourself sick," she said to him. Then she watered the wilted Wandering Jew, who she apologized to profusely. She fed fertilizer to the African Violet, for he loved the stuff. "Merci Beaucoup," he said with a belch.

"You're welcome," Mona said and then she went into the kitchen where she cooked herself a soybean burger, some wild rice, and a small salad. After dinner she combed her long blond hair, brushed her teeth with toothpaste that had not been tested on animals, and went to bed.

"Good night," she said to her precious plants just as her head fell gently upon her foam filled pillow.

"Good night, Mona," they called back. "We're most happy to have you home," the majority of them said, and it was no wonder whatsoever that she heard them. After all, she thought, if she could carry on a conversation with the Major, a man with the intelligence equal to that of a turd, why could she not talk to plants?

"People can not talk to plants," Rebecca complains pointedly after she reads and then rereads the prologue of Raven's book. They are in their bedroom and they are both putting on their pajamas.

"Mona can," Raven replies.

"What makes her so special?" Rebecca wants to know.

"She's my main character."

"I see," says Rebecca, "and does your heroine have to be a hooker with hair the color of honey?"

Raven laughs. "You devil. You've been peeking in my notebook."

"I was curious," she confesses carefully.

"Rebecca, my love, are you jealous?"

"Not in the least," she replies, but then she rolls over onto her side and goes to sleep without giving her husband her customary peck on the cheek.

Before falling asleep Raven realizes that Rebecca can hardly be jealous over a fictional human heroine, so he ponders the possibility that perhaps it is the book itself that is making her feel threatened in some way or another?

The dreadful sounding doorbell, that Rebecca so despises, ringing downstairs sometime in the middle of the night, awakens Raven. He jumps out of bed and on his way down the stairs to answer the door he wonders with each step he takes who in the world could be ringing the bell? Disoriented, he opens the door. It is Rabbit.

"Raven, I'm sorry to disturb you. May I come in?"

"Of course," Raven replies sleepily. He can tell that something terrible is troubling his furry friend, for there is bad news written all over Rabbit's face.

"I'm afraid I have something distressing to tell you," Rabbit says, as he takes off his boots. He begins to unbutton his over coat, but he is so unsteady on his feet that Raven has to help him into the living room.

"Sit down until you are feeling better," Raven says to his friend.

"Thank you," Rabbit manages to reply, as he takes a seat on the sofa that he has so often admired. He has a keen eye for antiques, so he can tell that it is an extremely expensive piece of furniture from the mid nineteenth century that he is sitting on.

"Now, if you can, tell me what is troubling you?" Raven asks with a colossal amount of concern in his deep voice. "You look like you've lost your best friend?"

"No, but I'm afraid you have."

"What, what do you mean?" Raven asks. His voice is now full of alarm. He has several best friends and the thought of losing any one of them is a terrifying thought.

"I might just as well come right out and tell you. It's Puff."

"Puff is dead?"

"I'm afraid so."

"Puff is dead?" repeats Raven.

"I'm terribly sorry."

"I can't believe it," Raven replies, and he is so upset he does not know what else to say. "It can't be," he cries, and suddenly he finds himself in what he believes is "a state of shock," but since he has never been in one before he is not entirely sure. "Please, tell me it's not true?"

Rabbit nods his head. His large ears flop forward. His ears fall backward. "I went to visit him last night. He went into a coma this morning and he died late this afternoon. I'm sorry to say he was in a lot of pain. He's been in bed with a high grade fever for five days and apparently he's been ill for several months. I must say it was absolute agony watching him die the way he did and being unable to help in any way. Even though I'm a highly trained veterinarian there was nothing that I could do. I may be a doctor, but I have no experience in diagnosing a diseased dragon."

"How?" Raven asks with an angry voice. "Was it the drugs? Did he overdose?"

"No, although in Puff's case that would seem like the most obvious answer. No, I'm afraid it was something far more sinister than drugs."

"More sinister than drugs? Is there such a thing?" Raven asks incredulously.

"It seems they've been dumping toxic waste into the ocean not far from Puff's place. For twenty years now they've been spilling all kinds of chemicals without a care in the world. Dioxins, PCB's, Chlorine, Mercury, you name it they dumped it, and quite frankly it was the build up of these contaminants absorbed into his system over a period of time that killed him."

Raven is furious. He flaps his wings. He flies off in a fury around the room several times even though there is no flying allowed in the living room. Finally, he lands on the mantel above the fireplace. Perched there he beats his wings in anger as though he is possessed. "Humans. Oh, how I hate them," he cries.

Rebecca comes downstairs to find out what is causing all the commotion. When Rabbit sees her he hops up and rushes over to tell her what has happened. "And I'm afraid Raven is not taking it well."

She coaxes her husband down off the mantel with Rabbit's help. Hereafter, they all sit down together to discuss Puff's death in further detail.

"Well, I wish I had known. Why didn't he tell me he had been sick?" Raven asks Rabbit.

"He didn't want anyone to know. It seems he's been suffering in silence for quite some time. I myself wouldn't have been the wiser if I had not paid him an unexpected visit."

Raven shakes his head understandingly. He knows better than anyone what a private soul Puff was.

"Of all his friends you were his favorite," Rabbit informs Raven, for somehow he senses that Raven needs to hear how important he was to Puff. Rabbit has no qualms about telling him, since prior to Puff's passing away the dragon had declared on his death bed how much he deeply admired "that big black bird."

"When is the funeral?" Raven inquires.

"The day after tomorrow. He requested a burial at sea."

"Would you care for a cup of tea, Rabbit?" Rebecca asks.

"That would be lovely, but only if it's no trouble?"

"None at all. I'll put on a pot."

"Was he in a lot of pain?" Raven asks after his wife has left the room.

"Yes, when I found him he was all curled up in his cave with a hacking cough. He could barely catch his breath. He complained of awful pains in his chest, headaches, and stomach cramps. I spent the entire night by his side which reminds me Ruth must be worried sick."

"She was here this afternoon looking for you," Rebecca tells him, having returned with the tea just in time to hear Rabbit's tragic testimony of Puff's final day.

"What made you pay him a visit?" Raven asks.

"Well, I bumped into Mr. Whale down by the cove and he said that he had not seen Puff for several days. He was worried, because Puff had not been feeling well. So I asked Mr. Whale to take me to the cave, for as you know the only way to get to it is underwater."

Shaking his head again, Raven reels when he remembers the last time he saw Puff: He is coughing up phlegm, but he claims his condition is nothing more than a common cold.

"Dragons don't catch common colds," Raven can remember saying to him at the time.

"It could be from smoking so many cigarettes," Puff says, for over the years his habit has

escalated into a frightening fifteen packs per day. "Dragon are not the most disciplined creatures," he confesses. "Plus, I have an addictive personality."

He did indeed, Raven thinks solemnly, and sipping on his tea in the living room with Rabbit and Rebecca he recalls his very first visit to Puff's cave. Smoking pot to "pass the perils of time," as Puff so plaintively put it, he passes a pipe filled with marijuana to Raven. Raven receives it reluctantly. At first he pecks playfully at the pipe with his beak, but after inhaling some of the sweet smelling smoke he proceeds to puff away with a passion. "I only had one or two tiny tokes," he later lies to Rebecca, who can see that he is in a stupor and obviously stoned. "Why even the whites of his eyes were red," she had faithfully informed Ruth.

"Have another puff," Puff says. "Take a deep drag," the dragon demands.

They are listening to loud music. To the likes of Led Zeppelin and Pink Floyd. "Another Brick in the Wall," is one of Puff's favorite recordings and listening to rock music is just one of his favorite ways to pass the time. In length not only does he love listening to rock music he loves to listen to it loud. "Have you heard the new Ministry album?" he asks, but of course Raven being more of a Barbra Streisand type of creature confesses that he has never heard of the band.

Puff, as it appears to Raven, is not only a neurotic nicotine freak and a pot head, he is also a heroin addict. "Yes, though I much prefer a pipe full of pure opium over a needle full of morphine, my good friend."

"And how many pots of coffee do you drink in a day?" Raven naively asks him. He is concerned, because of all the caffeine he sees the dragon consume in a single sitting.

Puff laughs. "There is no point in my drinking decaffeinated coffee or cutting down on the number of cups I drink when I shoot five grams of pure heroin every single day. I suppose, it is safe to say that I am a self-destructive dragon."

"I suppose you are right," Raven replies, though he can certainly see nothing safe about the substance abuse.

"Would you care for some crack cocaine?"

"How 'bout some mescaline?"

"No, thank you, Puff," Raven says, and he promises himself that in the future he will pass on the pot as well.

"Puff was under a great deal of pressure," Raven presently remarks to Rabbit and Rebecca. "He was very pessimistic about the problems of the world, and now he is extinct."

"If you ask me Puff had good reason to be pessimistic," Rebecca says. "He was five thousand years old. He saw the dawn of civilization."

"And every damn war that's ever been waged," Raven replies, quoting the dragon himself. "I remember asking him once why he was so self-destructive and he said that because he saw the birth of civilization in all its beauty he wanted to be in a stupor when he witnessed its demise."

"Yes," Rabbit declares, as though he is reading the Declaration of Independence or something of equal importance for the first time, "his was a soul that has seen it all."

Suddenly, Rabbit remembers something and he reaches into the pocket of his over coat to retrieve the item. "He left you these. I almost forgot. He told me he wanted you to have them."

"What are they?" Rebecca asks.

"I believe they are his poems," Rabbit replies. "He made me promise to give them to you, Raven."

Raven picks up the pages of Puff's poetry with pride, for Puff was the only one who ever

encouraged Raven in regards to his writing. Puff himself had no plans on being published. "I write my poems purely for pleasure and usually when I'm partaking in a pipe full of opium. But, I believe it was Shakespeare who once told me that I should consider turning professional, or perhaps it was Pushkin, or Proust, or, no it was the guy who wrote The Raven. We used to do drugs together, but for all the drugs in the world I can't remember the gentleman's name?"

"Poe. Edgar Allan Poe," says Raven.

"Quite right, funny that I should forget. How 'bout a hit of acid? I just got a new batch."

Rabbit leaves after drinking another cup of Rebecca's herbal tea, and then Raven and Rebecca both go back to bed. They do not sleep for long, because Raven has a dream which is so startling it awakens them both. "Puff was calling for me from his deathbed," he tells Rebecca, who can see that her husband is still trembling. "He was writhing in pain and just before he died he lifted his head and shouted something about there being toxins in the tide."

The long procession of animals in attendance at Puff's funeral comes as no surprise to Raven. Puff was very popular. Mr. Raccoon comes with his new bride. Mr. Squirrel and Mr. Owl both come. Mr. and Mrs. Fox and their family all show up. Mr. Wolf and his wife are there. Mr. Otter is a little late, but Mr. Bear and his bosom buddy Bachelor Buck get there early to help hoist the dragon's body up onto the sail boat. The animals that can not swim or fly line up along the sea shore as a show of respect, while the whales and the dolphins swim slowly beside the boat that is carrying the dragon's corpse. Raven and Rebecca sitting atop of the sail with their good friend Sea Gull are the first to see the storm that starts at sea. Forty mile per hour winds and fourteen foot waves force the pallbearers ashore. "It was a short, but a very sentimental service," several of the animals said.

"Puff would not have wanted anything too elaborate, anyway," Sea Gull, who is Raven's best friend, said.

Right after the wake, which is held at Raven Manor, Rebecca busies herself in the kitchen by cleaning up after all the company they have just had, while Raven steers himself straight up the stairs and into his study. He wishes the hailstones that are hitting his window would go away, but staring out at the stormy sea he remembers something Puff once told him about the earth. "Long, long before the industrial revolution the planet was a pristine place. A paradise," Puff says. "In those glorious days there were no cities like there are today. There was no such thing as smog. There was no such thing as pollution, period."

"Certainly, before the industrial revolution there was no such thing as toxic waste," Raven says to himself bitterly, as he puts a blank piece of paper into his typewriter. He hits the carriage return with his beak. Then with more passion than he ever dreamed was possible he begins to type. His talons, he tells himself, are like transmitters attacking the typewriter and transporting his message onto paper. He is certain, now more than ever before, that the book which he has decided to write is an absolute paragon of importance, much more so than any other previously published Pulitzer Prize winning novel or play. "Even if birds aren't supposed to write," he shouts at the stormy sea.

Puff's death is blow, but it inspires him to promptly put away the prologue and finish the first chilling chapter.

THE MURDERS

RAVEN ROCK, the sinister setting for this story, is situated by the sea on the west coast of Washington State.

The sun, slowly setting in the town of Raven Rock when Mona Babcock was arrested, was neither a spectacular nor a seductive sunset. There were no crimson colored clouds. There were no yellow streaks in a scarlet sky. There were hardly any hues at all, but there was, however, a haze on the horizon. She herself saw the last sliver of the sun slip out of sight. It seemed to sink into the sea and with its disappearance darkness would soon descend down upon the town of Raven Rock.

"...and what is the charge?" she inquired with an enormous amount of coldness.

"Murder. You are under arrest for the murder of Major Mackenzie MacDonald, and you have the right to remain silent..."

Mona Babcock was seldom silent.

"You have the right to an attorney..."

Mona Babcock firmly believed that human beings have no rights, even though they are constantly aggrandizing themselves with their arrogance.

"Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law," the cop concluded.

As a former prostitute Mona Babcock was accustomed to being used.

"I'm going to have to handcuff you."

"PISS OFF, YOU PATHETIC PIECE OF SHIT." She slapped one side of the officer's face, and then she took a savage swing at the other side. He stopped the second strike. He kned "the bitch" in the back, and he felt bad, but only because she was such a beautiful woman.

"Where are you two turds taking me?" she demanded to know after they had securely fastened the handcuffs around her wrists behind her back and not in front like they might have done if she had been less of a threat.

"To the station to be booked," they said, as they drove off in the direction of the police station.

In the back seat of the cruiser Mona tore off the buttons on her blouse with her teeth and in the same manner she ripped off her bra. With big bust bared for the officer's to see, and with more seduction than the setting sun, she said, "If either of you are interested, I'm a fantastic fuck?"

One of the officers turned around while the other one looked in his rear view mirror at Mona, who proceeded to bounce her voluptuous breasts like they were a pair of puppets in a pornographic play. "Perhaps," she purred, "if I suck off you and your partner you would find it in your FILTHY FUCKING HEARTS TO LET ME OUT OF THIS STINKING COP CAR?" And even though she was livid she could not help laughing at her own loudness, for sometimes even she was surprised by the sheer volume of her voice. I should have been a singer, she thought to herself, instead of a...

"Put your blouse back on," they said almost simultaneously.

She was strip searched at the station by a female homicide detective named Mary Manahan. Then she was taken into an interrogation room for extensive questioning by the female detective and by a male detective that Mona immediately labelled, loudly, as "A MACHO PIECE OF SHIT."

There was also a silver haired woman stenographer in the room, who was ready to take down any dialogue that was forthcoming.

Mary Manahan instructed Mona, the prime suspect of several recent slaying, to take a seat, and then she herself sat down.

"Did the officers in charge read you your rights?" the male detective inquired. His name was Richard Manning.

"If you mean those two bastards who busted me, then yes they read me my rights."

"And do you understand the charges laid against you?" detective Manning asked.

"I understand much more than you or any of your offspring could ever imagine, YOU FILTHY FUCKING MORON."

"Mame, may I remind you that you're under arrest for murder?"

"AND MAY I REMIND YOU THAT YOU ARE A FILTHY FUCKING PIECE OF SHIT. YOU HOMO SAPIEN. YOU MISERABLE MORON," she yelled as though the longevity of her lung power was everlasting.

Detective Manning looked at the file he had been holding in his hand ever since he entered the interrogation room. He glanced at his partner Mary Manahan. Then he returned his gaze back to the woman in question. "You grew up in Raven Rock, is that correct?"

"If it says so in your fucking file, FUCK FACE."

"You left on your twenty first birthday to be exact. You lived in Los Angeles for two years, and when you came back to Raven Rock two years ago you told everyone that your name was Mrs. Martyrelli, but we have no record of any marriage?"

"I made it up. The name and the marriage. I married Mr. Martyrdom," Mona said, and she said it with more seriousness than anything she had spoken so far.

"When you returned to Raven Rock two years ago around the time of your twenty third birthday that was the same time the murders began. You are either a very unlucky lady with terrible timing, or you're an unscrupulous cold-blooded killer? Myself I'm more inclined to believe the latter."

Mona could not care less about the cop or any of his inclinations and the expression on her face alone conveyed her indifference.

"We've been to your apartment. I found it particularly odd that you have no possessions, but you have over two hundred potted plants?"

Mona jumped up off her chair. "TOUCH SO MUCH AS A LEAF ON ANY OF MY PLANTS AND I'LL MURDER YOU."

"Sit down," he shouted at the woman with the wild eyes. "Now, we also noticed that you are compulsively clean?"

"If I keep the apartment clean the cockroaches won't come, which means I don't have to kill them."

Leaning forward detective Manning put his mouth in the proximity of his partner's ear. "Were any of the murder weapons found in the apartment?" he whispered.

"No," she answered.

"Anything that belonged to any of the victims?"

"No."

"Any evidence at all?"

"Nothing so far," detective Mary Manahan replied.

Then detective Manning looked at Mona with all the meanness a man like himself could muster, which was a considerable amount. "Mame, how many murders have you committed?"

Mona responded by shouting, "HOW MANY MINK COATS ARE THERE IN

MANHATTAN?"

Manning gave his shoulders an uncertain shrug, as if to say, "How the hell should I know?"

"Too many," Mona said in complete control of her temper.

Detective Manning made it a point to repeat the question in a patient tone of voice. "Mame, how many murders have you committed?"

"HOW MANY MARTYRS ARE THERE IN MANHATTAN?"

This time detective Manning's only response was a puzzled expression.

"Not nearly enough," Mona said with a sinister smile in answer to how many murders she had committed and to how many martyrs she believed there were in Manhattan.

"May I ask how many that is?"

"NO YOU MAY NOT."

"Must you always yell?" detective Manahan asked.

Mona, who would say or do just about anything to get what she wanted, whispered, "Yes."

Now it was detective Manning's turn to yell. On the surface it would appear that he was running out of patience, but in reality he was simply trying another approach. "There have been nine unsolved murders in Raven Rock over the past two years." He made a gesture to his partner, who proceeded to read off a list of the victims names to Mona.

"I KILLED THEM ALL, AND I'D KILL THEM AGAIN, AND AGAIN, AND AGAIN. ONLY THIS TIME I'D MAKE THEM SUFFER EVEN MORE."

She is mad, Manning thought to himself. She's a fucking lunatic and Mary Manahan must have read his mind, because they exchanged an all knowing look.

"Mame, suppose you start by telling us about the murders? Who was the first?"

"The florist was the first," Mona said, and she said it in a whimsical way. "He was also a homosexual, but that's not why I killed him. I have nothing against gay people, per se."

"Why did you kill him?"

"HE CUT FLOWERS," she hollered.

"What do you mean," Manning asked.

"It's a scientific fact that flowers and plants have the ability to feel pain. Even I can prove they have feelings..." she stopped talking and it was several moments before she spoke again. It was the first time since her arrest that she showed the slightest signs of empathy for anything, and the fact that it was "fucking flowers" she felt sorry for did not go unnoticed by the astute detectives. "Anyway, I went into his shop one night to buy an African violet. He was chopping up a bunch of red roses for a bouquet. As he cut the stems I could hear them crying..."

"Who could you hear crying?"

"The flowers," Mona said, and she said it as though the person she was speaking to was extremely stupid. In many ways detective Manning was.

"Continue," he told her.

"Well they were crying. They were begging to be allowed to live, but he, being no better than you're average butcher, could not hear them. He did not care. He simply did not care. If he had he would have been able to hear their little lost voices crying out in agony, 'Let us live. Let us live. Let us live. Ouch. Ouch. That hurts. I'm going to die.' So, justifiably so, I killed him. I took his cutting shears and I stabbed him twelve times."

"Why twelve times?" detective Manahan asked.

"Because, BITCH, he had killed a dozen red roses."

Detective Manning whistled and looked at his partner, who was just as perplexed. He raised

his eyebrows as if to say that in all his years as a homicide detective he had never heard of a more inane motive for murder. He turned to Mona. "And the fisherman? When we found him he was disemboweled and he had a fish hook in his mouth?"

"It was in the springtime. I had decided to take a walk in the woods. Spring is my favorite time of year. I love to watch Mother Nature as she awakens after a long winter. Anyway, like I said I was walking through the woods towards the river on the outskirts of Raven Rock when I saw someone fishing. I spied on him from a short distance. He was catching sunfish and he was leaving them on the river bank to suffocate. He didn't even have the common sense or the decency to knock them unconscious. He could have put them out of their misery by killing them quickly, but no, he chose to let them suffer. For a while I watched the fish fighting frantically for air. Their gills going in and out desperate for oxygen filled me with despair. I was going to kill him right then, but something told me to wait. I introduced myself. We talked for about an hour. He told me he was twenty four years old. Old enough, I thought at the time, to know that fish have feelings. I remember he was wearing this stupid baseball cap and a jean jacket. I also noticed that he was using live worms for bait and that bothered me as well. When I mentioned my concerns he laughed like I was crazy and said that sometimes he used live frogs. He also told me that he fished there every Friday afternoon in the same spot. So the following Friday I went back and sure enough like before I found him by the river bank. This time there were two rainbow trout dying in the grass. The fisherman smiled when he saw me. My blood was boiling, but I smiled back. And that's when I tricked him into closing his eyes and opening his mouth. 'I'll give you a big surprise,' I said and I don't know what he thought I was going to give him? Something sexual, I suppose. 'Sorry to disappoint you, sport, it's only a piece of peanut brittle,' I said as I plopped a piece of the candy I'd baked the night before into his miserable mouth. 'It's homemade,' I told him, and the moment he bit down on the hook I'd hidden I yanked the fishing line attached to it. The hook got caught in his lower lip and I laughed. He screamed. And of course he opened his eyes about as wide as they would open. His hands flew up to his face. His lip was already spurting blood, and that's when I let him have it. I stabbed him eight times with the scaling knife he'd used so often on fish."

"That wasn't all you did?"

"No, I sliced his stomach open and scraped out all of his insides as well."

"How did you get hold of his knife?" detective Manning asked.

"I stole it out of his tackle box the Friday before."

Detective Manning was almost certain the answer to his next question would be as silly as her reason for the red roses, but he had to be sure, so he asked it anyhow. "Why did you stab him eight times?"

"Because he killed four worms and four fish in front of me," Mona replied.

Both detective Manning and Manahan were beginning to get a clear picture of the type of person they were dealing with. Though they were sure it would take a team of psychiatrists to pin point the precise problem. They knew for certain though that they were dealing with a psychopathic personality. "And the lumberjack we found dismembered?"

"That was about a month later, because it seems to me it was summertime. I was walking in the woods again, but this time I was deliberately out looking for a lumberjack whose chain saw I had heard from more than a mile away. Once I was in the forest the trees told me which way to go..."

"Wait a minute. The trees told you which way to go?"

"That's what I said."

"Ok, continue."

"When I found him I think he was quite surprised to see me that far into the woods dressed the way I was..."

"How were you dressed?"

"Like a cheap whore, but very provocatively just the same. He was extremely forceful. I had no alternative but to fuck him first. I convinced myself that it was for a noble cause, and after all it wasn't like I'd never turned a trick before. Afterwards, I asked him to show me how to use the chain saw. But, instead of giving it to me he started showing off by cutting down some small spruce trees. Then he sawed a fir tree in two, while I just stood there staring in disbelief at a stump sticking out of the ground. An eighty five foot pine tree was the next to go. Soon a cedar fell. A helpless hemlock lost it's life. Then I made the lumberjack stop just as he had set his satanic sights on a two hundred and fifty year old Rocky Mountain maple."

"How did you know the tree was two hundred and fifty years old? Did you count the rings?"

"I didn't have to. The tree told me how old it was. I told the lumberjack to stop. I had seen enough. I could not take anymore. Every time a tree was cut it cried out in pain. There were bodies all around me. Then the lumberjack started sawing off branches. The buzzing of the chain saw nearly drove me out of my mind. I thought my head was going to explode, but my psychological pain was nothing compared to the physical suffering of the trees. They were being tortured. I shiver just talking about it. I finally convinced the lumberjack to let me try. 'Here, baby, you can hold it, but be careful it's awful heavy,' he said in a tone that sickened me. He showed me how to use it, and I used it all right. He was standing on my left as I recall when I swung around and before he knew what hit him the blade was buried in his belly. He didn't even have time to blink. I cut the bastard in two. 'TIMBER,' I yelled at the top of my lungs as the lumberjack fell to the ground. Then like the lacerated limbs and the broken branches of the trees that lay bleeding before me I bowed down and I sawed off the lumberjacks arms and legs."

"Then what did you do?"

"Alas, I was covered in sawdust that was soaked in blood. I'm not sure, but I think I went home and took a shower."

"All right, the owner of the fur factory?"

"Huh, he was fifty five, fat, unfriendly, and he farted during dinner of which he ate, in front of me, five lamb chops. He was not wearing deodorant. His hair was uncombed. I don't believe he was partial to brushing his teeth more than once a week, and I'd be surprised if the coroner could confirm that his body had ever come into contact with a bar of soap. Suffice to say he smelled much worse than any of the animals he murdered to make his millions of dollars. He was filthy, stinking, rich. After our disgusting dinner date I told him I wanted to see his fur factory. 'Show me the place,' I said, 'where you kill the muskrat, the mink, the chipmunk, the chinchilla, the marten, the sable, the foxes, the wolves, the raccoons, the snow leopards, the cheetahs, the lynx, the ocelot, the ermine, the badgers, the skunks, the squirrels, the hares, the rabbits, the seals, the opossum, the weasel, the bears, the wolverines, the wallaby..."

"What is a wallaby?" detective Manahan asked.

"It's a small kangaroo. I mean, can you imagine a coat made out of a kangaroo? I can't. I can't imagine a coat made out of anything except something synthetic. It's sickening. What kind of a person could wear a kangaroo coat? Or a raccoon coat? Or a..."

"What happened?" Manning asked, for he could not care less about kangaroos or raccoons

being killed for their fur. Human lives were what concerned him, so he was more interested in the killer that he had caught and her confession.

"Well, he had a rather strange expression on his fat face, and for a moment I was afraid I'd given myself away. 'We don't kill the little critters here,' he assured me. 'We just make the coats, but I could show you around the factory if you want, you sweet, sexy thing. By the way, how do you know so much about the fur industry?' he asked me. Off the top of my head I told him my great, great grandfather was a furrier. I couldn't think of anything else to say at the time, and for all I know he could have been a big enough bastard to be just that. Well we pulled into the parking lot behind his fur factory. It was nine thirty at night. I remember, because he looked at his watch and said that all the employees had gone home hours ago. He turned off the burglar alarm and we went into the back of the building. You know the red brick one? The one that has a store in the front on the main street of town with mannequins wearing mink coats displayed in the window. Anyway, we went in the back and all over the place there were piles and piles of pelts. Everywhere I looked I saw the skins of dozens and dozens of different dead animals. I was shocked and sick to my stomach to see so many species murdered for the sake of mankind's affinity for fashion. I swallowed the bile that had risen in my throat, and asked him to explain the process. 'Well,' he said, 'if you really want to know we soak the furs in different types of chemical solutions, then the skins are tacked upside down with thousands of tiny nails in whatever position is required for the pattern. Then we have to carefully scrap the skins to remove fat. Then we wash them, treat them with a series of chemicals that soften and preserve or tan the skin. Small animals usually have to be sewn together lengthwise.' When he was finished he grinned proudly and waited for me to reply. "HOW MANY DEAD MINKS DOES IT TAKE TO MAKE A ONE COAT?" I asked him just before I bashed him over the head with a two by four I'd conveniently found under foot. While he was unconscious I dragged him to the nearest vat filled with some kind of bleaching chemical. I dumped him into the vat and then I waited for about ten minutes until he either drowned or died from the chemicals. I do not know which and it did not make one damn bit of difference to me. Next, I put on a pair of rubber gloves, but when I tried to pull his body out of the vat segments of his skin stuck to me. His private organs were gone and pounds of his flesh just fell to the floor. I gathered all the pieces in a pile and placed them, bones and all, onto one of the flat boards. Then I nailed him neatly upon it. What I really wanted to do the entire time was scrap his fat off his skin while he was still alive. Then I could have made myself a coat. I also considered putting his skin on display in the front window of the store, but as you know it's on the main street and someone might have seen me. Anyway, when I left I turned the burglar alarm back on."

"The owner of the Care Less Chemical Company? How did you kill him?"

"I had to wait for weeks until his wife and children were away, because I had no reason to kill them, though I'm sure with a little digging I could have found several reasons. Anyway, they finally went to Seattle for a long weekend. I pretended my car broke down, but of course I don't even own a car. He lived in the richest area of Raven Rock. He invited me into his house to use the phone. I told him I was from Oregon, a tourist travelling up north. He offered me a Martini while I waited for the tow truck which of course never came. He told me I looked familiar. He had probably seen me around town or maybe he'd noticed me following him off and on for the past few weeks. 'I have one of those faces,' I said. 'Not at all,' he replied. 'You have a beautiful face.' We were sitting in his living room on a large leather sofa..."

The detectives knew where the man lived. They knew the killer had drank a martini with the

victim, though there were no prints left on the glass. They also knew only too well how he had died; they had seen his acid eaten body in the bath tub. "Nothing but bones, sir," a sergeant surveying the scene had gagged and said.

"...I was carrying a small can of toxic waste in my purse, which included a strong solution of sulfuric acid. I stole it from the Care Less Chemical Company. He kept looking at my legs. He was rather lecherous. I lifted my skirt and allowed him to look all he liked and a little higher. Again, I was dressed very provocatively..."

"Like a cheap whore?" detective Manahan offered.

Mona ignored what she considered to be a compliment, and continued. "I told him I'd been driving all day and felt dirty. He was the fool who suggested we take a bubble bath together. 'You can soak your weary bones,' he said salaciously. He went into the bathroom of his million dollar home and began filling the tub. 'Bring your drink,' he hollered. I took my purse as well. He undressed himself and he was semi erect when he climbed into the tub. Pretending to be shy I asked him to close his eyes while I took off my clothes. 'You're not bashful, are you? You're too beautiful,' he said. 'Oh, but I am. I'm extremely shy,' I said, so he closed his eyes. 'No peeking,' I told him, as I opened my purse, and as quietly as I could I lifted the lid off the can that was clearly labelled with a skull and crossbones. 'Ok, you can open your eyes now,' and the moment he did I dumped the contents of the can into the water. He screamed. He tried to get out of the tub, but I hit him on the forehead with the empty can. He fell back down and that's when my leg was burned. Some of the sulfuric acid splashed up onto my thigh." Mona showed the detectives the small, but unsightly scar.

"What were your reasons for killing him?" the detectives needed to know.

"He was illegally dumping corrosive chemicals into the ocean."

"Did you have any prove?"

"Ask the Mayor," Mona said sarcastically. "He can tell you all about it."

"Not anymore he can't," detective Manning's said. "But before we get to the Mayor tell us about the two hunters?"

"I met them at the roadhouse here in Raven Rock. They were drunk and disorderly. They were bragging about some big buck they had just blown away. I smiled self-assuredly, and said, 'Hunters turn me on.' And then as sincerely as I could sound, I said, 'There's something about men that murder deer that drives me crazy.' Of course they were crude enough to think I mean they drove my cunt crazy. 'I'd love to go into the woods sometime with both of you.' I winked and emphasized the word both. So when the bar closed they took me to their cabin about thirty miles east of Raven Rock. The drank a bottle Scotch whiskey, snorted some cocaine, and boasted some more about all the bucks they had blown away. It made me sick to have sex with them both that night, but before I let them screw me I made them swear they would take me hunting with them in the morning. We got up just after dawn. I pretended not to know anything about guns, but I let on that I was eager to learn. They gave me a loaded rifle to carry. 'Just in case you get a clear shot,' one of them said. We hiked through the woods all morning without seeing a deer. Then late in the afternoon we came upon a mother moose and her calf. The hunters started shooting haphazardly at both of them. I was dumfounded. I could not believe it. They killed the moose and her calf both within a matter of moments. For a while I could not move I was in such a sorry state. But when I came to my senses I shot both of them in the back. They only got what they deserved and like I said before I would do it again only this time I would make them suffer."

"Why did you wait until they killed the moose to murder them? Why didn't you kill them in their cabin, or in their car, or at the bar? Hell, lady, why didn't you butcher everybody in the bar? Why haven't you gotten rid of everyone at every roadhouse in Raven Rock?" Detective Manning was now not only losing his patience he was becoming extremely appalled.

"I don't know why I waited. I think I needed the incentive. I'm never really sure that I can go through with a killing until I'm completely convinced the person I'm killing is a killer. In their case I became convinced when they killed the moose."

"And the farmer?"

"Yes, the farmer. I told him I was from California; a writer doing a magazine article for a major meat manufacturer. I wanted to spend the day on his pig farm. I said my article was called Pork Chops vs Porky the Pig. He had no idea what I was talking about, but he showed me his "spread." I told him that I was particularly interested in seeing how they slaughtered the hogs. He said most of the livestock is sent off to a slaughterhouse in the city. I was slightly disappointed, because again I needed that incentive of seeing the inhuman suffering that takes place in a slaughterhouse to get my killer instinct into high gear. But when he told me, quite casually, that sometimes they butcher the odd boar out back I breathed a sigh of relief. He took me into the barn. He showed me the hypodermic syringe occasionally used to sedate the pigs. 'More often than not we just hit them over the head,' he offered. I spotted a small bottle of the knock out drug on a shelf and even though I did not have a plan at this point when he wasn't looking I picked up the syringe and the sedative and placed them in my pocket. He proceeded to show me one of the pig sties. The pigs were watching me when I stuck him with the syringe and they squealed. They also informed me that they were pleased, so with a feeling of satisfaction I dragged the farmer back into the barn. He was heavy, but with the help of a winch I hoisted him up in the air. He was hanging upside down on a hook when I slit his throat. I laughed, for in no time at all he was as lifeless as a piece of pork at the local supermarket. Then I had to leave in a hurry, because a car drove up."

"The pigs told you they were pleased?" the detectives questioned.

"If I can talk to plants and trees why should I not be able to talk with pigs? They are extremely intelligent creatures," Mona told Manning and Manahan.

"And now we come to the Mayor of Raven Rock?"

"Ah, the Mayor," Mona said, and when she said it she sounded like a serpent spitting out a pellet of pure poison. "THE MAYOR WAS MENACE TO SOCIETY," she shouted. "The man was being paid off by the Pulp and Paper Mill, by the Care Less Chemical Company, and by every other company in town that needed a cheap way of disposing of their toxic waste. They dumped dioxins, PCB's, mercury, lead and God knows what other garbage into the river in Raven Rock and as you both know the river empties directly into the ocean..."

Mona Babcock was seen with the Mayor in a filling station on the night of his murder. The gas bar attendant later identified her in a police line up. Her bloody fingerprints were found all over the interior of the Mayor's car and on the note that was nailed to his head. They already had more than enough evidence to put this woman away for the rest of her life. The case was closed, the detectives thought to themselves, but they were eager just the same to get the rest of her cold-hearted confession, for then the jury could convict her all the more quickly.

"...I followed him all over town for more than a month. Everywhere he went I went. Finally, I managed to arrange a private meeting. I seduced him, and the following Friday night he picked me up at my apartment. He was driving a Mercedes Benz, and it's ironic that he had on a fur

coat, because it was probably a pay off from the owner of the fur factory. As far as I was concerned the Mayor was already as good a dead. It was dark inside the car and I thought that maybe the coat was muskrat, or mink, but when I asked him he told me it was cougar. A cougar coat? Can you imagine? Like I said I could have killed him right at that very moment, but because he was married he did not want to be seen in town, so we drove to Seattle where I spent two of the most miserable days of my life in a motel room. Most of the time he was at some political meeting or he was visiting his mother in an old age home, but he spent his nights at the motel room with me. Looking through his wallet early one morning I found a personal check from the owner of the Pulp and Paper Mill. I also saw a picture of his mother from the early forties wearing a marten stole. Sunday night on our way back to Raven Rock I told him that I was turned on and to stop at the edge of town. 'I know a spot by the river where we can be alone one last time,' I said. I'm a vegetarian in case you didn't guess, and when he kissed me I could smell beef on his breath. The sacred cow, I thought to myself, and I gagged when I pictured my tongue touching pieces of a sirloin steak stuck between his teeth. 'You are responsible for all the garbage being dumped into this river,' I told him, as I wiped the back of my hand across my mouth. I had been carrying one of my kitchen carving knives for two days waiting impatiently for the perfect opportunity. I took it out of my purse surreptitiously, while he gloated about all the money he had made from his 'garbage scam' I stabbed him over and over and over again."

The coroner who performed the autopsy said, "Well over a hundred times." But Mona claimed every stab was for a good cause. "This one's for the cow in your stomach, you insensitive mass murderer," she said, as she drove the carving knife into his chest for the first time. "This one's for the baby seals you and your kind have slaughtered," she said upon stabbing him for the second time. "This one's for the whales, and this one's for the toxic waste, and this one's for the dolphins that die everyday in dragnets..." And so on she stabbed the Mayor of Raven Rock repeatedly. "This one's for the coat that you are wearing, for the cat that you killed. This one's for the minks that you, and many others like you have murdered." And with her eyes bulging, she screamed, "THIS ONE'S FOR YOUR MOTHER'S MARTEN STOLE." And when the tip of the knife broke against his backbone she felt that the stainless steel blade had somehow betrayed her, so she began stabbing the Mayor with even more of a vengeance. "This one's for the beavers, and this one's for the bears. This one's for the buffalo, and this one's for the hares. This one's for the elephants, and this one's for the plants. This one's for the crocodiles, and this one's for the ants. This one's for global warming, and this one's for the air. This one's for the ozone layer, and this one's for MY DESPAIR."

She kept on stabbing him and stabbing him and she kept on telling him what every stab was for. "This one's for the nuclear bombs, for every war ever waged, for every automobile ever built, for the acid rain, and for the rain forests..." It was her last powerful plunge with the knife that had been for all the pollution period. And when she cut off his head she said, "This is for every animal on earth."

It was dark outside so she was able to drag his body down to the river without being seen, not that there was anyone around to see her in the first place. As she stood on the river bank she watched the headless corpse float away; and feeling rather righteous she put his hacked off head into the trunk of his blood soaked car. Then she drove directly and defiantly into Raven Rock. "And I left his stinking skull on the steps of the town hall."

The detectives eyed each other emphatically, while the silver haired stenographer was so sickened she had to leave the room.

"I also nailed a note to his head that said, 'SOCIETY SUCKS! PEOPLE WHO POLLUTE WILL PAY THE PIPER!'"

The homicide detectives had seen the note. They did not need to be told what it said. They looked at Mona for a long time. "What did you do after that?" detective Manahan finally asked the prisoner.

"I drove back to the same spot. I left his car at what you cops call the scene of the crime. I was covered in blood, so I washed myself off in the river."

"And then what did you do?"

"I cried."

"Because you had committed another murder?"

"NO, YOU MORON, BECAUSE THE RIVER WAS POLLUTED!"

"So much for Mother Nature not finding out about the book," says Mr. Bear. "It is already being talked about in every forest in every country all over the world," he adds.

"Just about every animal that hears about the book wants to be in it or wonders if they already are," says Bachelor Buck.

The truth be known, Mr. Whale wonders if he is in the book? Mr. Badger and his wife, Betty, wonder if they are in it? Mr. Wolf, by far the worst, wants to be in the book so bad he goes so far as to snap at Raven, but then he apologizes for his bad behavior. Mr. and Mrs. Fox are so intent on becoming characters they stop by Raven Manor almost every day. Mr. Woodchuck and Mr. Otter are also after Raven to write about them, though they are not nearly as persistent as Mr. Rat and Mr. Snake who insist that some of their cross country adventures be included. Mr. Eagle and Mrs. Toad who is twice a widow thanks to Mr. Snake, both believe that their (boring and often told) trip together to Oregon would make for fine print. Mr. Dolphin, a dear friend of Raven's, says he will not feel forsaken if Raven decides not to write about their five year long friendship. "Don't worry, Mr. Dolphin, I'll find some way to fit you in," Raven says. Mr. and Mrs. Cougar are another couple close to Raven and Rebecca, who pretend not to care, but of course they do. Mr. Caterpillar, who is about to spin herself into a cocoon in Raven's backyard believes that an entire chapter should be devoted to her transformation into a butterfly.

Raven receives hundreds of messages from animals all around the world. Pandas in China and chimpanzees from Africa beg to be in the book. Tigers from Siberia send word that they want in as well. Snow leopards from the Himalayas. Wild geese from Canada. "Please," these creatures cry, "in one way or another we are all an endangered specie." Condors from California send their complaints about the critical loss of their habitat. Penguins from the North and the South Pole plead to be included and they too complain to Raven about their plight. Grizzly bears from Yellowstone National Park remind him how before the arrival of the white man, the oh so mighty musketeer, they roamed much of the United States. "At one time we were numerous and now needless to say we are nearly nonexistent." Nearer to home Mr. Porcupine and Mr. Opossum are very competitive when it comes to which one of them will see their name in print

the most. And the fight that they have on the front lawn of Raven manor is more than enough reason for Raven to lose his temper.

"Stop your fighting," Raven shouts. "It is quite impossible," he says to Rebecca, who is standing by his side, "for me to include every creature. Why, I'd have so many characters the book would be crammed, confusing, and claustrophobic. "But," he assures his friends, "in a way each and every one of you will all be in the book."

"I for one think it's absurd that he's writing a book to begin with," says Mr. Bear.

"Silly bird, to be sure," Bachelor Buck offers. "Utter nonsense. A novel? Why most of us can't even read."

Bachelor Buck, who gets his nickname from having been a bachelor all of his adult life, has to put up with a lot of flack from his forest friends. There are rumors around the Washington woods that Bachelor Buck and Mr. Bear are much too intimate and the majority of the animals consider their behavior to be abnormal. Mr. Bear gruffly denies the accusations. Yet, when Bachelor Buck looks at Mr. Bear and Mr. Bear looks back at Bachelor Buck, more often than not, it is with a lustful look in their eyes, and furthermore, they usually know what the other one is thinking so deep is the bond between them. They know each other so well, in fact, that they have a habit of saying the same thing at the same time. "And you can be sure," they say now in unison, "that Mother Nature knows all about the book by now."

"Good afternoon, fellows," Sea Gull says, as he glides down to the front lawn of Raven Manor where Bachelor Buck and Mr. Bear have been waiting for Raven.

"Good afternoon, Sea Gull, we were just discussing Raven's novel and we both think it's odd for a bird to be writing a book when most animals can't read. Wouldn't you agree?" asks Bachelor Buck.

"Well, I understand that he's writing it for the human race to read," Sea Gull says to them. "And I can see no reason why he shouldn't."

Every day now Raven spends so much time in his study room he has an enormous amount of pity for a canary he once had the pleasure of knowing, for at times he feels like a caged bird himself. Right now, Raven has returned to his writing and he is watching Bachelor Buck and Mr. Bear from his study room window. They have been waiting for him on his front lawn for several hours now. He has no intention of stopping in the middle of the chapter he is working so feverishly on to go outside, but when he sees Sea Gull swoop into the yard he drops what he is doing and starts down the stairs.

"Is it a biography?" Mr. Bear, acting more like a badger, asks the moment Raven reaches them.

"Is it about us?" Bachelor Buck inquires with the curiosity of a cat.

"Sometimes you can both be such a bother," Raven says to them shaking his head from side to side. He smiles at Sea Gull, whom he has not had the pleasure of seeing since Puff's funeral. "How are you?" he inquires.

"I can't complain," Sea Gull says. "How are you?"

"Oh, I'm fine. Where have you been hiding? I haven't seen you since Puff's funeral. The last time you disappeared you were running from some bird you left with a nest full of eggs?"

"Can we go inside? I'll tell you all about it," Sea Gull says.

"Well, we have to be going anyway," says Mr. Bear, since no invitation to go inside Raven Manor is forthcoming. "Rabbit and Ruth have invited us to dine with them this evening," he adds. "Come along, Bachelor Buck, or else we'll be late."

"Yes, some type of salad no doubt," Bachelor Buck comments as they go off into the woods.

"I'm sure they mean well," Sea Gulls says to Raven once they are alone.

"Oh, of course they do," Raven replies while holding the screen door open for Sea Gull, "but I'm far too busy to bother with Bachelor Buck and Mr. Bear."

They settle in the kitchen, because of the breeze that is blowing through an open window. It is the middle of summer and it is stifling hot. "I'll pour us some lemonade. I think Rebecca made a pitcher this morning," Raven says on his way to the refrigerator.

"Where is Rebecca?" Sea Gull asks.

"Shopping. Where else?" says Raven, as he pours them a glass of lemonade. "Now, what is your news?" he asks sitting back down across from Sea Gull at the kitchen table.

"I'm in love. Her name is Sally. I've just spent the most glorious week of my life with her. I'm thinking of asking her to be my bride. She's the most beautiful bird in the whole world."

"Where is she from?" Raven asks, for he knows all of the sea gulls in the area and he has never heard of a Sally before.

"She lives in Raven Rock, but her family is originally from Seattle. Her parents flew here before she was hatched. They were out looking for a nicer place to nest when a wind storm forced them to land in Raven Rock. Now I know what you're going to say. She's a city bird, so what could we possibly have in common? But she says she hates Raven Rock and she wants to move to the country. She's coming this weekend and I want you and Rebecca to meet her."

"Bring her over for dinner on Saturday night," Raven suggests.

"That would be fine. I just know you're going to love her. I am so happy."

"I'm happy for you and I'm glad for some good news."

"I have to be going," Sea Gulls says as he finishes his lemonade. "I'm sure you want to get back to work anyway. How is the book coming along?" he asks.

"Slowly, but surely. Slowly, but surely," Raven reiterates.

After Sea Gull is gone Raven has some time to think by himself before Rebecca returns. As of yet he has not been able to break a certain piece of news to her. He can't decide how best to tell her and in the mean time he can't help worrying about how she is going to react? They have been married for two years and in that time they have never been apart for more than a few hours, so it's highly probably she may be less than pleased about his plans.

"Rebecca, dear, I have something to tell you," he announces during dinner that night.

"What is it Raven?"

"I don't know how to tell you, but it's imperative that I go away to do some research."

"Away?"

"Just for a while."

"I see," she says. "Where to?"

"New York and Los Angeles."

"New York and Los Angeles?" she repeats with an incredulous tone of voice.

"I'm afraid so," he says.

"When?"

"This weekend. Sunday, I suppose, since Sea Gull and Sally are coming for dinner on Saturday."

"How are you going to get there?" she asks.

"Fly, of course."

"All the way to New York City? You'll exhaust yourself," she says, and she is already

worried sick about the well being of her husband.

"My dear, I meant I'll take a plane. I bought my ticket this morning. I fly to New York first and then back to Los Angeles."

"I see," she says.

"Are you upset?"

"Should I be?" she asks.

"I won't go if you don't want me to?"

"No, Raven, I will support you all the way if it is what you have to do?"

"It is, and thank you, Rebecca. I love you. You are the best wife a bird could ever ask for."

"Tell me, though, what will a country bird like yourself do in such dreadful cities surrounded by hundreds and hundreds of human beings?"

"Research," Raven replies. "They are centers of civilization and I have to see them for myself if I am to write about them. I have read about big cities in books. I have seen pictures and television programs of these people filled places, but that is not enough to depict them properly. And what makes you so certain they are such dreadful places? You are a cynic."

Rebecca laughs, and she has a lovely laugh. It is just one of the many things that Raven loves about his wife. "I watch the news," she replies. "I have eyes. I can see. I hear what goes on in such places filled with people."

"I would ask you to come with me, but I know you would not enjoy yourself."

"To say the very least, I know you are right," she replies.

Raven flies economy class across the country on American Airlines to research a book that Mother Nature is about to ban, but as he boards the jumbo jet he has no idea that "Her Highness" has even heard about his literary intentions.

On the plane itself he notices how many passengers are afraid of flying. He tells the nervous person sitting next to him to relax. Forty thousand feet above the continental United States of America is somewhat higher than Raven is accustomed to flying, but still he feels right at home. "Why wouldn't you," the anxious woman beside him snaps, "you have wings."

It will be two months before Raven returns from his trip: weary, worldly, and shocked by some of the things he is about to see. Sea Gull came on Saturday night like he said he would with his "sweetheart" Sally, under one wing. "And she has Raven Rock written all over her face," Raven remarks to Rebecca right after their guests have gone.

"I don't know how you could tell anything under the mound of make-up she was wearing?" says Rebecca. It seems that Sally is definitely not the country bird that Sea Gull described, but she is bright enough, and articulate enough that Raven and Rebecca both find her a favorable companion for their friend.

Raven recalls their dinner with Sea Gull and Sally while on the plane next to the nervous woman. He is sitting in the window seat, so looking at the rain clouds far below he also remembers the tears in Rebecca's eyes the following day when he is ready to leave for the airport. "Take care of yourself," she says. "Hurry home," she says. "I'll be waiting here for you," she says. "I'll miss you," she says. "I love you," she crumbles like a cookie and cries. "Don't forget to write," she says. "To me," she adds.

In New York City Raven carries a notebook with him wherever he goes under one wing. "What a sight," he writes to Rebecca. "It is worlds away from our quaint Washington woods." he goes to the Bronx Zoo and in his notebook he mentions how they keep the animals locked up in cages. He goes into Brooklyn, and then he goes to Yankee Stadium where he sees a baseball

game already in progress. Of course he does not have to pay to gain admission. Instead he perches on a goal post. He watches the game from this preeminent position while being pointed at by several spectators, who believe he must be their new mascot. After quickly learning that the Yankees are playing the Oakland A's Raven roots, with the rest of New York, for the Yankees to win. During the second inning he goes for popcorn, but when he gets to the concession booth the line up is so long he settles for picking some kernels up off the pavement that have been dropped by various people. "Too much butter," he complains to himself. Then back on the Yankee goal post he boos with everybody else when Oakland wins the game.

Monday morning he goes to see the Statue of Liberty for it is high on his list of places to go. Again he does not pay. He simply flies to the top and lands on the light the lovely lady is holding in her hand. Nor does he have to pay to get to the top of the Empire State Building, or to the top of the World Trade Center. After going to the Metropolitan Museum in Manhattan he takes a trip through Times Square and then by accident he gets on a Broadway Avenue bus that delivers him into Harlem. "Hell on earth," he writes in his notebook for future use. "It amazes me how on the same island so many black and hispanic people live in poverty while so many white people live in luxury?" he writes in a long letter to Rebecca. "Unlike the poor people who seem to have no where else to go, I was able to fly right out of there. Then I decided to take a subway ride. A startling experience that was when a gang of humans surrounded me and just because they had never seen a raven in New York City before they thought it befitting to beat me up."

He goes to a nightclub in Greenwich Village and writes: "Human beings hopping around like Rabbit and Ruth while lights flash all over the otherwise poorly lit place." Here, he does not drink, so at the bar he sips on something called "a club soda."

"Hey, how come yer in a bar, yer a bird?" the drunken man next to him slurs.

"Research," Raven replies, and he is ready to leave, but before he has a chance he is cornered at the bar by some woman who says, "You're cute. Wanna buy me a drink?"

Raven obliges both the woman in question and the bartender by buying her whatever she wants, for he figures he can pump her for information.

"What's your name?" he asks her.

"Margaret."

"Do you come here often, Margaret?"

"Are you trying to pick me up?"

"You weigh too much, and why would I want to?"

"Hey, you're funny. What do you do?"

"What do you mean?"

"For a living?"

Raven isn't sure how to answer the question, but he responds in the correct context when right out of the blue he replies, "I'm a writer."

"Oh, really," she says, "this frigging town is full of poets and playwrights. Do I know you?"

"I don't think so. We've never met."

"I mean, have you been published?"

"Oh, no, not yet. I'm afraid this is my first time."

"I've read all of Stephen King's books. Who is your favorite?" she asks.

"Living or dead?" he asks her.

"Contemporary, of course," she replies.

"Johnathan Crimson Clover-Cook."

"I've never heard of him?"

"There's no reason why you should have. This is his first book," Raven tells her.

"Oh really, what does he write?"

"Why he's writing us," Raven replies with a frown on what can hardly be called a forehead.

"I don't understand?"

"He is writing about you and me. If it wasn't for him, my dear, we would never have met. If it wasn't for an idea he had I would never have come to this here bar."

"I still don't understand?"

Raven tries to explain. "Who were you this morning?"

She tries to remember. "I don't know. I know my name is Margaret, but I don't know. Nobody, I guess?"

"Precisely my point. After I'm gone once again you will be nobody. You are just a minor character created by Johnathan Crimson Clover-Cook. Your time is temporary. Furthermore, you have no future and you have no past except for whatever the author gives you or the reader chooses to imagine. Soon I'm afraid you will no longer exist."

"Johnathan Crimson Clover-Cook? What kind of a name is that? It gives me the creeps. Have you ever met him?" she inquires.

"No, but I saw him once from a distance."

"What does he look like?"

Raven is about to give her a detailed description, but some strange formidable force stops him from saying anything. "I, I, I can't speak," he stutters, because I won't let him.

"Oh really, well can you tell me where you saw him?" Margaret asks.

Raven feels his voice return, but he looks around the bar before he opens his beak. "I suppose it's ok to tell you, or else he wouldn't let me. It was very early one morning. I was on my way home from the Animal Food Store. Rebecca, my wife, was waiting for the window cleaner she had asked me to buy..."

"You're married?" Margaret asks.

"Yes."

"Too bad," she tells him. "You're terribly attractive."

"Anyway, when I flew by him he started calling, 'Quork, quork, quork...' Of course he didn't sound at all like a raven, but it was an honest effort, so I turned back. I landed on a tree top and he just watched me. I could tell that he was really excited about seeing me. I believe I was the first raven he'd ever seen."

"I feel terrible," Margaret announces.

"Why?" Raven asks.

"Because I am not important. I only have a bit part."

"Don't feel bad. You are important, and it's possible you will be remembered? Maybe, you will be mentioned in another chapter? But, even if you aren't, there is no such thing as a small part. There are, however, lots of small people."

"And what happens to you next?" Margaret inquires.

"I won't know until it happens. Until I turn the page so to speak."

"Buy me another drink."

"Of course," Raven says, and then he takes out his pocketbook to pay the tab that he has been running with the bartender.

"You're loaded," Margaret exclaims when she sees the stack of bills he is carrying, though he has no idea what she is talking about.

"You'd better be careful carrying all that cash around with you. You're not a New Yorker, are you?" she knowingly asks.

"No. Are you?"

"Yep," she nods her hairless head and when she does Raven finally gets up enough nerve to ask her why she has no hair.

"I'm a skinhead," she replies. "Do you like it? I just had it done."

"It's very becoming," he tells her truthfully. "And you see, now you know you're from New York. You know you recently shaved your head, and soon we'll see what else you know? Would you like another drink yet?"

"Not right now. Are you trying to get me drunk so you can take advantage of me?"

"No," Raven innocently responds.

"Too bad. So, where did you say you're from?"

"An area around Raven Rock."

"Where the hell is that?"

"It's in Washington."

"Washington DC?" she asks.

"No, Washington State. I don't want to get personal, but I was wondering if you could answer a couple of questions for me?"

"Shoot," she says.

"Excuse me?"

"Go ahead, honey, ask me whatever you want."

"First of all do you like being a human?"

Margaret is taken aback by the question, and for several moments she seems to look lost until she lowers her long eye lashes and then she seems to be rather thoughtful and introspective. While she is thinking she moves her body to the beat of the music. Raven waits patiently for her reply. "It's horrible. I hate it. I don't know, maybe if you're the almighty Madonna, but I'm sure she has her problems too. It's this fucking world we live in. Man, I'm telling you if we don't smarten up we're going to turn this planet into giant toxic wasteland, and even before that if we're not careful we're going to blow ourselves the fuck up, and when that happens, honey, we'll all be in the same boat, and I don't mean Noah's ark. No, it won't matter then whether you're the richest son of a bitch in the world, whether you're some asshole like Saddam Hussein, the President of the United States, the Pope, Peter, Paul, Mary, or the magnificent Madonna."

"Do you think there is going to be a war?" Raven asks her.

"There is always a war."

"Then do you think the human race is going to bring about the end of the world themselves?"

"I don't think. I fuck, and frankly my feathered friend I no longer give a damn."

At the last minute Raven decides to change his plans. He is sitting at the airport waiting for his flight to Los Angeles when he spots a poster with palm trees and a sandy beach. "MIAMI WANTS YOU," the seductive poster says. Raven rushes to the ticket booth with his mind made up. "When is the next plane to Miami?" he asks the man behind the counter, who proceeds to check his computer.

He gapes at Raven like he has never seen one before. "There's a flight leaving in fifteen

minutes and might I point out that it is pronounced Miami and not Miami."

Raven never one for spending money unnecessarily purchases another economy class ticket to his newly decided destination. "I'm flying to Florida," he writes to Rebecca.

Two hours later the plane lands at Miami International. Raven leaves the airport and checks into a hotel by the beach. It is one o'clock in the afternoon and a hundred and ten degrees in the shade. Sweat pours off his beak as he hurries out of his hot hotel room. He goes down to the pool dressed in a colorful pair of short cotton pants. The pool is packed with people, so he sets off to find the beach he saw on the poster, the one with the picturesque palm trees. He finds it is also over crowded, but he does his best to ignore the swarm of high school students standing between him and the seashore. He hippity hops across the hot sand towards the surf. Sticking his talons into the Atlantic Ocean he is almost certain he can hear them sizzle. He sits by the seashore for several hours. When the sun goes down he flies to a shoe store on Biscaine Boulevard where he buys himself a pair of summer sandals. "The ocean here is so much warmer than the one we have in Washington. I wish you were here with me," he writes to Rebecca on the postcard he purchases in the lobby of his hotel.

Staying in Miami for one week he becomes fast friends with two pelicans that are presently waiting for him on the pier. He's been led to believe that he is meeting them for dinner and for a walk on one of the wharves.

"It's not far," they say, but before Raven realizes it he has flown half way to Fort Lauderdale where the pelicans are planning to purchase a kilo of cocaine. The pelicans promise, however, to have him back in Miami by morning.

"Oh, yes, we've heard about your book," one of the pelicans tell him while the other pelican pours from an icy pitcher another pint of beer for their foreigner friend.

"For my wife, Rebecca, I must go gather some sea shells by the seashore," Raven slurs. He deserts his friends by flying away as quickly as he can. He has less than two hours to make it back to Miami, hit his hotel, pack his possessions, and get to the airport, but because he is so drunk he does not know in which direction to go. He can't rely on his instincts to guide him, for they are inebriated. Disoriented, he flutters up to a policeman directing traffic on Ocean Drive. "That a way," the policeman says pointing in the general direction and Raven flies off in a panic to catch his plane.

"Rebecca," he writes, "I am on my way to Los Angeles, at last. Love Raven."

In New York Raven had become accustomed to taking the subway from one borough to another, but when he lands in Los Angeles late that night he learns that his hotel in Hollywood is a long way from the airport. He is too tired to fly, and furthermore he wants to humanize himself as much as possible before returning to Raven Rock to write his book, so like any typical tourist in California without a car he takes a taxi.

The next morning he flies over the Hollywood Bowl, the Shrine Auditorium, Sunset Strip, and Hollywood Boulevard. "This is where Mona, my main character, will ply her wares," he writes. "Here on Hollywood Boulevard. Right in the same spot where that woman is standing down there," he says to himself. The woman on the corner does not look at all like Mona, Raven realizes, for the woman in question has short dark hair and she is several inches shorter than the way he imagines Mona. Still, his curiosity causes him to swoop down for a more thorough investigation. She is startled to see him and she walks willfully away. "Wait," Raven calls, but either she does not hear him or if she does she is ignoring him. Then a car pulls up to the curb and the woman is about to get in when another prostitute strolling down the sidewalk calls her

away from the car. "Pandora! He's a cop." Then their pimp, who is packing a semi automatic pistol down the front of his pants, surveys the scene and says, "Don't you dumb bitches know a fucking pig when you see one?"

"Her name is Pandora," Raven scribbles in his notebook, and then he flies off, for her name is all he needs to know. For several weeks, though, he will wonder why he saw no "pigs" on the street?

He puts his notebook away and scans the sky just in time to see the sunset in Malibu, for it is here where he has been perched writing for the past two hours. Taking flight he soars above one of the many mansions spread out along the coastline. He imagines the one directly below him to be Madonna's house. He remembers Margaret mentioning the "almighty Madonna," and he remembers reading in a magazine that the movie star lives in Malibu. He flies up and down the coast several times searching for the star before he becomes bored with the idea and decides to rest on the side of a cliff. Sitting there soaking up the salty ocean air he is spotted by a sea gull who flies back and forth several times before she builds up enough confidence to begin a conversation.

Raven, who senses her shyness, makes it easy for her by calling her down to the cliff with his warm Washington wood's nature. He notices that she is young and pretty. She tells him her name is Sinda spelled with an s and a e. Then she tells him that she is "totally turned on" by Raven, who is her senior by several years.

"You're so big and black," she also tells him.

Temptation takes a hold of him by the tail and twirls him around. He figures that Rebecca is far enough away she can not possibly find out, but after fighting with his conscience he feels himself again, so he quickly changes the subject by saying, "Do you know where I might find Madonna's house?"

"Feed me to the sharks," Sinda says. "I can understand why every man in the world might want Madonna, but you're a bird. Don't you find me at all attractive?" she coos.

"Of course I do, but I'm happily married."

"Oh, all right, I can take you to her house if that is all you really want?"

Raven follows her in flight up the coast. "There, over there. That's the one."

"Holy cow," Raven exclaims. "It is far bigger than my Raven Manor. Thank you, Sinda, for showing me the way."

"Any time."

"Are you sure this is her place?"

"I'm positive. I crashed one of her parties and my boyfriend pooped on her potato salad."

"Is she nice?"

"She didn't shoot us, so I suppose she is," Sinda says.

Sinda isn't too upset when Raven sends her away. "It's ok," she tells him. "I have to go to San Diego anyway. My boyfriend's coming back. He's been following a ship for several months at sea. They're docking today."

Raven bids her good bye and he forces himself to forget as best as he can all about her abundance in the plumage department; he does so by flying over the high wall surrounding Madonna Louise Ciccone's estate. He lands in her big backyard. He flaps his wings again and he goes unknowingly up to Madonna's bedroom window. He flits from one window to another searching the insides of the house for the star, but it seems she is not at home.

Raven is anxious to go home himself, so the following day he boards the first flight he can to

Seattle. From here he flies himself to Raven Rock, where at once he is welcomed by the Washington woods. "A wiser bird indeed," says Mr. Owl, who is one of the first familiar faces that Raven has seen for quite some time.

"Civilization is scary," he informs Rebecca at Raven Manor after he flops down in front of the fireplace. "And I am most happy to be home with my wonderful wife."

"Tell me all about your trip."

"Well, in Los Angeles I spied through Madonna's bedroom window."

"Who?"

"Madonna. She's a movie star. You might have seen one of her videos on MTV? Anyway, I looked in every window and I rang the front door bell, but she wasn't home."

"Raven, you should be ashamed of yourself spying on a movie star."

"I wasn't spying. I might possibly have been invading her privacy, like a reporter, but I certainly wasn't spying. Anyhow, I flew back later that night. I looked in her bedroom window again and sure enough she was there. I expected her to be surrounded by servants, body guards, gorgeous male dancers, female friends, family, fans, photographers, reporters, agents, producers, publicists, but she was all alone. She was lying on her bed naked reading a book. She seemed so much more vulnerable than the woman the world knows. And then she stood up and danced over to the window, and well, it was a moment I will remember forever."

"What else did you do during your trip?"

"In Miami I saw a whole bunch of people on a yacht snort white powder up their nostrils. It was a chemical called cocaine. Then they acted very peculiar shouting, 'Party. Party. Party.'"

"People are peculiar," Rebecca points out.

"I was quite surprised," Raven tells her.

"Why should substance abuse surprise you? After all Puff was a heroin addict," she reminds him.

"I know, but Puff was a single case and a tragic one at that. Five thousand years of living lead up to his condition, plus he was contaminated. No, I'm talking about a common recreation the humans have. Then I watched a woman on a street called Hollywood Boulevard. All night long the wretched creature climbs in and out of cars. It took me some time to realize that she was a prostitute like my Mona, and then it occurred to me that like Mona she must also be a very unhappy human being."

"There are hundreds of thousands of unhappy human beings," Rebecca replies.

"I watched another woman being raped in a parking lot, and then in an alley late one night I witnessed a young girl's murder by two masked men. There was nothing that I could do. I called for the men to stop beating her, but of course they paid no attention to my pleas and they continued brutalizing her. After her assailants fled I flew down and sadly she was already dead. I have no idea why they did it."

"You didn't...?"

"No, Rebecca, don't worry. I had just eaten my dinner. Anyway, the next time I travel I want my wife to come with me. I missed you very much, my dear. Very much indeed."

"Thank you, Raven, but I have no desire to ever land in a city. I flew over Seattle once when I was just a fledgling and that was quite enough. I don't even like the small town of Raven Rock."

"I know exactly what you mean. The smog in Los Angeles made me sick the second that I arrived. I'm so used to my clean fresh country air, but even the country is becoming

contaminated. The whole planet is polluted and in danger of being destroyed from so many different directions I don't know what to do, or which potential disaster to pick for the premise of my book?" Raven says.

"Humans are hateful," Rebecca adds suddenly and spitefully. "Why every animal on earth knows that. They are selfish, greedy, aggressive, arrogant, good for nothing creatures to be avoided at all times."

"There are good ones and bad ones, but I'm inclined to believe the bad far outnumber the good," Raven tells her in his worldly way.

"If you ask me humans are too clever for their own good. Why they have bombs big enough to end all life on earth. Yours and mine included, Raven, dear."

"I know Rebecca," Raven replies remorsefully, as he remembers the remark made by Margaret in Manhattan. 'I don't think. I fuck, and frankly my feathered friend, I no longer give a damn,' she had dangerously declared. And now sitting snugly by the fireplace Raven begins to wonder how many other people on the planet share her apathetic opinion?

"Let's go to bed," Rebecca suggests. "I'm getting a headache, and dare I say this subject depresses me. Human beings are vile creatures who act very disrespectfully towards Mother Nature. Need I say more?"

In bed together for the first time in two months Raven playfully pecks his wife's throat and then he pulls her even closer to squeeze her feathery figure. "You feel wonderful," he does not fail to inform her.

Rebecca pushes him away, and when she does Raven can not help noticing the anger arising from the depths of her dark eyes. "Tell me more about Madonna and why you were spying on her?" she demands.

"I wasn't spying on her. I simply wanted to interview her for my book. It was a matter of research and nothing more."

"Did she speak to you?"

"Yes, but at first she didn't see me sitting on her window ledge. Like I said, she was reading, but after awhile she put down her book. I was about to quork to gain her attention when she turned on some music and danced over to the window. When she first saw me she was startled, but I assured her that I meant her no harm. It was a warm balmy evening. There was an ocean breeze blowing. She leaned out the window. Then she looked right into my eyes and with a nasally New York accent she said, 'Relax, Raven, the human race may not always be on the right track, but the road has not come to a dead end, yet.' True, I told her, but the end is right around the next bend. Then just as I was about to fly away a photographer hiding up in a tree snapped a picture. As I flew back over the wall that surrounds Madonna's mansion I realized that in a way the whole world is just outside her window watching her. Then the next morning when I was at the airport waiting for my flight I picked up a tabloid, because on the front page there was a picture of me in flight and behind me Madonna bare breasted standing in the window with the outrageous caption: MADONNA GOES TO BED WITH BIG BLACK BIRD!

"Did you get any writing done?" Rebecca asks.

"Indeed I did. As a matter of course, my dear, I have finished another chapter."

THE PROSTITUTE

Behold, MONA BABCOCK, a beautiful baby at the time is two years old and she is a terribly intelligent and intuitive tot, but being a bright baby is not always a bed of roses, for already she can see the wonderful world into which she's been born. *

Follow, for a while if you will, FERAL F. FORRESTER, an infant sleeping peacefully in an incubator, whose ignorance is understandable, and whose innocence is only temporal. His tiny heart beat, his breathing, his brain, and all the rest of his vital organs are at the moment being carefully monitored on a maze of machinery. He is unaware, however, of his sterile surroundings; unseeing, and uncircumcised, but soon he will open his eyes for the first time to see the wonderful world in which he's been born. *

Mr. and Mrs. Forrester, proud to the point of being tinkled pink, are the epitome of preeminently perfect parents. They are standing staunchly by the incubator talking to the young dedicated doctor who has aided in their son's survival. "I know you're both very anxious to take him home, but I'd like to keep him under observation for a few more days. As you both know he was quite premature and I'd feel better if he gained some more weight."

After the doctor left the Forrester's to fend for themselves they both stared, with a certain amount of resentment, at the glass bubble that separated them from their baby. A smile soon formed, however, on Dorothy Forrester's feminine face. "Isn't he beautiful?" she whispered to her handsome husband.

"Yes, he certainly is," Dennis Forrester replied.

When the visiting hours were almost over they left the hospital hand in hand and together they walked across the street to where their car was parked in an underground garage. On their way out Dennis stopped his car to give the attendant on duty a parking stub and two one dollar bills.

After Dorothy found out she was pregnant, for the third time, they sublet their apartment in downtown Seattle and moved into the country seven miles south of Raven Rock. She'd had two previous miscarriages and this time she wanted to make sure that she would have not only a healthy baby, but one that was also alive. So sternly she set about doing everything she possibly could to prevent losing the life inside of her. She started onto a strict diet: no cigarettes, no caffeine, no alcohol, no drugs, no red meat. She did exercises her doctor said would strengthen her abdominal muscles. But then her worst nightmare came true for the third time. Five months into the pregnancy she went into labor. When her water broke in the bathroom it not only flooded the floor it naturally led her to believe she was about to lose another baby. Miraculously, one might say, she made it to the hospital just in time. But here she gave birth to a baby that weighed only a fraction over four pounds. Luckily, the little boy lived and everything had turned out all right; for now they were mother and father to a healthy bouncing baby boy who was getting bigger by the day. And because she had finally given her darling Dennis, the husband that she adored, the son he had always wanted, she was sure that the stars would shine down upon them for the rest of their lives?

Not so, for as they drove further away from the city of Seattle Dorothy found herself having to fight off a foreboding feeling. She forced herself to think about how blessed they were. And the country will be a wonderful place to raise their son, she thought. Dennis had gotten had good deal on the house. Three acres of land surrounded the two bedroom bungalow. It was all they could afford, but it included a carport, a barn, and a huge backyard. They were planning on planting a vegetable garden in the spring to grow their own and Dennis, who had been able to get a job as an accountant in Raven Rock, had just recently turned one of the bedrooms into a nursery.

No sooner had the happy couple turned onto the main highway when Dennis pulled off onto the side of the road and stopped the car. He switched seats with his wife, and once she was securely settled behind the wheel she lifted her dress over her head and tossed it into the back seat. Dennis unzipped his fly and helped his beautiful bride with her brassiere. It was dark by now and the traffic that zoomed by looked like one long line of light in the other lane. He cupped into the palm of his hand an exposed breast. They were still slightly swollen and full of mother's milk. Leaning forward he ran his tongue across a hard yet highly sensitive nipple. Dorothy moaned pleurably when her horny husband's beard brushed against her breast and she moaned even more so when the tip of his tongue touched her. She proceeded to pull her pink panties down around her ankles. She lifted the lacy lingerie from her foot and then she roped the garment around the rear view mirror. She threw the car into drive, gunned the engine, merged boldly back onto the freeway, and into the fast lane they flew.

They did this often, for Dennis loved to watch his wife driving naked at night. The feeling of the engine reverberating beneath his buttocks, the way his wife's bare bosom bounced with every bump in the road, and the seductive sight of her long luscious legs stretched forward all ignited his engine. Dorothy got equally excited, because her husband got so turned on, because she liked the feeling of power she got, and because she was a bit of an exhibitionist so therefore the apprehension that a passing truck might see her tits turned her on. Also, Dorothy noticed that Dennis often got an erection that was bigger than any of the hard ons he had at home. Not that there normal sex life wasn't always satisfying, and sometimes their lovemaking was even sensational, but fucking on the freeway was far more fun than fooling around at home. Dennis began stroking himself with his right hand, as he promiscuously placed his left hand deep between his wife's wet and willing thighs. She squirmed eagerly, grabbed the stick shift, and threw the car into fourth gear. "Oh, baby, I'm so hot," she groaned. "I'm going to cum..."

It was very unusual for Dorothy to cum so quickly. More often than not Dennis would have to go down on her at home not that he ever complained of the hardship. Sometimes they would get out of their car and if it was late at night he'd fuck her on the front lawn. "Isn't the grass great?" Dorothy would always declare with dew on her derriere. Quite often he would "hump" her on the hood of the car with the engine still running and the motor "nice and hot," or he would give it to her on his work bench in the garage where he would always act like some stud by saying, "Suck on my power tool, you wench," or else he would say, "I'm going to put my big hammer into your hot hole, honey."

Now, he suspected Dorothy was so turned on because it had been quite some time since they had performed this risky ritual. Maybe her hormones were in high gear and were having a hey day? Or perhaps her body was overly sensitive from giving birth? These thoughts turned him on all the more and he began beating himself faster and faster. "I'm going to shoot," he gasped.

Dorothy lost control of her body and the car, for she was overcome at about the same time by

a tremendous orgasm and a transport truck travelling at top speed. The driver of the truck was in a hurry to get home and had disregarded the speed limit. Dorothy swerved uncontrollably to the right of the road; veering suddenly into a blinding light that filled their small Volkswagen Beetle from behind. The sound of tires screeching, and the sickening sound of steel scraping against steel, and steel grinding against asphalt was all around them. Sparks flew in every possible direction. Dorothy screamed when the truck smashed into the back of their VW bug, but suffice to say the scream was cut short. She had tried to get out of the way and off the freeway and she had slammed on her brakes, but it had been a hopeless gesture. Their car flew through the air, came crashing down on its roof, and presently it was nothing more than a mangled piece of metal that burst into flames. The transport driver lost only minimal control of his truck and he managed to pull safely off to the side of the road several hundred feet ahead. Dennis died almost instantly. He never got a chance to "shoot." Dorothy on the other hand, did not die right away. She was rushed back to the same hospital she had just come from. But, as the pair of paramedics wheeled her naked, bleeding, burned, and broken body through the emergency room doors she croaked, "My baby." *

Mr. and Mrs. Babcock, Mona's mother and father, lived on a farm ten miles north of the town of Raven Rock. They did not make much money farming, "but we made Mona," they were always happy to say to anyone who would listen. Mona's mother was an excellent cook, and her father was a good provider. Therefore they always had plenty of food on their table. Even when "tough times" overtook their household there seemed to always be a surplus of milk and eggs and honey. They had several chickens, a horse named Henry, a cow they called Cleopatra, and best of all, for anybody with a sweet tooth, out back they had a beehive. Their means of transportation into town was a pickup truck and they used a tractor to plough the fields. Most of their money came from the crops. By fall the fields were usually filled with at least five of the following: wheat, wild oats, barely, corn, potatoes, hops, or hay. Mona, their only child so far, was named after the Mona Lisa. Mona's mother's name was Grace and she had seen the painting in Paris while traveling one hot summer in search of sophistication. Mona's father, whose name was George, had inherited the farm from his father Franklin, Mona grandfather, who had bought the land for next to nothing during the Great Depression. After he died of a heart attack at the age of eighty five George, his only son, took over the farm on a full time basis. George and Grace wanted more children. Because neither one of them had any brothers or sisters they did not want their Mona to grow up an only child. They wanted a home filled with lots of laughter, lots of love, and lots of kids. In fact, Grace was already pregnant with her second. She did not know it yet, for how could she when the insemination leading to life had occurred less than an hour ago. As a couple they were very fertile and forever affectionate, so Grace would not be a bit surprised, since she certainly did not bother with birth control.

"We're going into town to pick up some feed for the chickens. Do you need anything, Mrs. Manford?" Grace asked.

Mrs. Manford lived in a little cottage less than a mile from the Babcock farm. She was sixty something, though she would never say for sure. Living by herself for so many years had caused her to become somewhat eccentric and set in her ways. Her neighbors called her "a nutbar," but "a nice enough one," they would add. And whenever she could she loved to look after the Babcock baby. "Pick me up some purple nail polish," she replied. "I've got a date tonight."

"With who?" Grace asked casually.

"You don't know him. He's new in town."

"You have a date nearly every night, Mrs. Manford. I'm surprised there are so many single men your age in Raven Rock?"

Mrs. Manford did not know what to say. She smiled with the innocence of a school girl, something she was good at. She shook her head, as if to say she was also surprised by the surplus of single men. Then she shook her head again to stop a strand of her dyed red hair from falling forward onto her face.

"Hurry up," George hollered, for he was already waiting in the truck with the engine running. He was perhaps the most impatient person Mona's mother had ever met. He was always on the go, always in one hell of a hurry, but there was no doubt in her mind that one day he would be financially fit, for all of his hard work on the farm was bound to pay off eventually, Grace thought. She was not a greedy woman, however, so having a lot of money did not matter to her.

"I'm coming," she called from the kitchen. She kissed Mona good bye. "Be a good little girl." She turned to Mrs. Manford. "Will you make sure she finishes eating? She's been in a miserable mood all morning and last night she barely touched her dinner."

"Don't worry," said Mrs. Manford, "I'll take good care of little Miss Mona."

Grace raced out the front door and on the porch she stooped to pick up the morning newspaper. She smiled at her husband as she got into the cab of the truck. "I'm sorry, Mona's in a bad mood. Something's bothering her. You know, I've noticed that she's very intuitive. The day before you had that accident with the tractor and hurt your leg I couldn't keep her from crying. All day long she kept calling for her 'Daddy.'"

"Yeah, I remember," George said, for he had noticed it too at the time.

As they drove down the dirt road that led to the winding highway which would take them the ten miles into town Grace put her hand on her husband's knee like she usually did whenever they drove together.

"Every time I turn around those two are touching," Mrs. Manford mentioned to Mona back at the far. "I wonder, child, just how often your mother and father FORNIFICATE?" she snapped at the terrified two year old. "Tell me, child, do they FUCK in front of you?" she asked. Mrs. Manford did not date like she said she did. She did not dress up, dye her hair, paint her nails, and wear make-up to attract the opposite sex. She did it all to tease, to torture, to torment, and to reject men. She hated sex. She hated men. She hated George Babcock. She hated his wishy washy wife. And at the moment she loathed little Miss Mona.

George patted the back of Grace's hand and then he wound his fingers through hers, so that his hand and her hand were locked together.

"Put some music on," George suggested.

She played one of their favorite cassettes, and for farmers they had fine taste in music. The tape she selected from their classical collection was none other than Ludwig van Beethoven's Fifth Symphony.

"Turn it up," he told her; and with their hands entwined together they swung their arms to the beat of Beethoven: Bum, bum, bum, bum...

At the time Grace was wondering what Mona might be when she grew up? A scientist? An astronaut? A musician? A movie star? George was also thinking about Mona, his "little muffin" and about the tiny bruise he'd noticed on her back at breakfast; and when the Babcock's in their pick up truck went around the next bend the white tailed deer that were standing in the middle of the road were thinking about their fawn in the forest not too far away. George jumped on the brake pedal, but the deer were only twenty feet away when he did and no amount of brake power

could have stopped the truck in time. The doe was the first to die. She went down to her death by being pulled under the truck where her corpse then became caught on the tailgate. The big buck, who had been standing by her side was her mate and he was thrown up onto the hood. He went through the windshield and with his torso in the cab of the truck George and Grace were both kicked repeatedly in the head with the herbivorous's hind hooves. At this point George lost complete control of the truck when it skidded. It spun on the road several times like a toy top before it flipped and went flying over the guard rail. It was a two hundred foot drop off the cliff that they careened over. The deer, of course, were dead long before the truck crashed at the bottom of the ravine. George had also been killed before the truck went over the steep embankment. A piece of the windshield was wedged in his throat the entire time. Grace, on the other hand, was alive and alert for every foot of the frightening fall, and holding onto her husband's lifeless hand as tightly as she could. She did not stop breathing until she hit the bottom, and the music of Beethoven could still be heard long after the crash, for the cassette continued to play: Bum, bum, bum, bum... *

When he was a full grown man Feral F. Forrester became a fire fighter and in fact he was on his way back from having fought his very first forest fire in the Washington woods when he bumped into Mona Babcock.

Besides blossoming into a beautiful blond, Mona Babcock had become an environmental activist and she was hell bent on putting an end to pollution. She was on her way to a "Save the Planet from Destruction" meeting when she ran into Feral.

The storm, which began innocently enough as a summertime shower had, without warning took a severe turn for the worse. Because of the heavy rainfall there was not a lot of traffic on the winding road, but because of the dense fog there was very little visibility, so when the two cars collided in a head on crash it came as quite a surprise to both of the drivers, who were discovered unconscious and were rushed to the hospital in Raven Rock.

"You were in an accident," the doctor said.

"It's all so foggy," Mona, who had been travelling south, said. "Was anyone hurt?"

"You were in an accident," the doctor said.

"I don't remember," Feral, who had been travelling north, replied. "Was anyone hurt?"

"You're very lucky to be alive," the doctor said on both occasions. "As a matter of fact, it's a miracle. Two miracles, you might say."

"When can I go home?" Mona wanted to know.

"Can I leave soon?" Feral inquired.

"I'd like you to stay overnight," the doctor said, "just as a precaution."

"Who was the other driver?" Feral asked.

"Doctor, who was in the other car?" Mona thought to inquire.

"A young woman."

"A young man."

"May I meet her?"

"I'd like to meet him, if I may?"

When they met in the hospital hallway they were drawn dynamically to each other. Even before their doctor formally introduced them they both felt a powerful attraction just from looking into each other eyes. Like two magnets they merged, and this chemical collision packed a greater punch and made a more lasting impression upon their lives than their first sixty mile an hour meeting. Certainly, more sparks flew.

Mona, who was a firm believer in fate, felt, in fact, she was convinced from the moment they met in the hallway that the car crash was no carefree coincidence. "It was destiny that brought us together," she declared.

Feral, who did not believe in fate, felt that it was a freak accident and nothing more. "It's funny though," he said, "both of my parents were killed in an automobile wreck."

Mona gasped. "So were mine," she said. "And you know I don't usually drive and I'll definitely never own a car. I was driving a rental. Do you know how many people die on the road every year?" Feral didn't of course and at the moment he was more amazed by the number of plants that Mona had. She had taken him to her apartment for the first of many times.

"And the carbon dioxide released from automobiles causes more pollution than all the pulp and paper mills on the planet put together. Not that I'm for paper and pulp mills." And to further prove her point she took several pamphlets out of her purse on the subject of smog and showed them to Feral.

"Well, what can one do?" He asked just to be polite, but if he had known at the time how environmentally friendly his newfound girlfriend really was he would have headed for the hills as fast as his car would carry him.

"It was in the shop and so must my senses have been," he would later say to himself.

"We can walk," Mona stated on that sun filled afternoon in her apartment amidst the array of plant life that she so loved. "Ride a bike. Horse and buggy. Pollution free public transportation. There are all kinds of alternatives to the gas guzzling automobile," she stated.

These notions seemed somewhat impractical and perhaps even unimportant to free spirited Feral F. Forrester. But a month after their sixty mile an hour meeting he realized he was madly in love. The feeling was mutual, for Mona loved Feral far more than even fate had intended for her to. Unfortunately for Feral he found out, not quite soon enough, that he had fallen for a fanatic. "ONE OIL SPILL AFTER ANOTHER, AFTER ANOTHER, AFTER ANOTHER," Mona screamed in a rage and then she startled Feral further when in a fury she threw a tea towel at the television set.

It seemed Mona was on a mission. Every other night she went to environmental meetings of some sort or another. Furthermore, she talked to plants like she talked to people. More often than not though, she was far more polite to her plants. She also claimed that they talked back and made more sense than the majority of the human race. She yelled at Feral for wasting water. For flushing the toilet too many times. For taking too long in the shower and for using too much hot water. For leaving the lights on. For failing to recycle bottles and cans. She found fault with him for everything he did that was environmentally unfriendly. She was also a strict vegetarian and was irrational on the mere mention of meat eating. "Listen, you carnivore, it says in the Bible. Thou Shalt Not Kill. It does not say we can indiscriminately murder every species but man. It says, Thou Shalt Not Kill."

"I haven't read the Bible," Feral confessed in confusion.

"I haven't either, but that's what it says."

"Let's talk about something else," Feral said.

Mona agreed and went into the bedroom where she slipped into what she said would be "something more seductive."

"You know, Feral," she said when she returned wearing the skimpiest outfit she could find that afternoon in the lingerie store. "I'm truly in love with the fact that you save trees from forest fires. It's such a noble profession. It's also befitting that you're a fire person," she purred,

"because when we make love I feel like I'm on fire." Licking her lips she touched herself between the legs and then leapt on the bed where Feral was lying.

The first time they made love was right after their release from the hospital. They went to a motel, because it was close and an impersonal place. At the time neither one of them planned on spending more than a few hours together, but after their lovemaking lasted all night long they were both reluctant to leave the other. Sparks did indeed fly in every direction and according to their cries of ecstasy that evening they both felt like they were aflame. "It feels fantastic when you're inside of me," Mona moaned.

"You feel terrific too," Feral said. "You're so fucking tight."

"You're my first, Feral," Mona had whispered in his ear.

"Are you a virgin?" he asked with wide eyes.

"I was," she said with a smile.

Now, several months into their relationship and a lot of lovemaking later, Feral was at his wits end. An hour ago he had agreed to marry Mona. Just prior to their nuptial agreement he had gone into the bathroom to brush his teeth where he was obliged to notice the claw marks on his back. He also spotted the purple blotch on his neck that Mona had made with her masterful mouth. "I am going to leave my mark on you," she had said, and then she had given him one hell of a hickey.

"Fuck," Feral had said to himself, and then he thought: How will I explain the claw marks and the hickey to my wife, Jane, who is coming home that day after tomorrow? Jane, whom he had met and had married two years ago on a vacation he took to the Bahamas. She had been there on business. As his bride she had moved back with him to the two bedroom bungalow he had inherited from his parents, but she found Raven Rock extremely boring, so she had returned to her hometown Washington DC. She was heavily into politics and had gone back to funnel out a career. Now he was supposed to return with her to the country's capital. She had already made arrangements for him to join the fire department in Washington DC. In the bathroom, and for the past few months in fact, he forced the entire matter out of his mind. He put his shirt on and he went back into the bedroom. Mona was lying on the bed. Stunningly beautiful as ever she was on her stomach stark naked reading a magazine that had a photograph of Madonna on the cover. As fate would have it the second thing that came out of Mona's mouth was a marriage proposal. The first thing she said Feral found much easier to answer. "What do you think, darling, should I do my hair like Madonna?" Mona had asked.

"I like it long," Feral answered.

She turned over and she tossed the magazine aside. "Feral F. Forrester, will you marry me?"

Feral was at his wits end. He wasn't sure why he had said, "Yes." He supposed it was easier at the time than telling her the truth.

The wedding was less than a week away when Mona first noticed that something was troubling her fiancée, but she assumed that something was a simple case of nerves not a previous pledge.

He left her high and not so dry at the altar. It was the middle of July and Raven Rock was having a heat wave, while the church was having trouble with its air conditioner. She waited and wilted in her wedding gown for five long hours even though after fifteen minutes her intuition told her the "rat" had run off.

Mona very seldom cried. Oh not because she didn't care, or because she didn't feel deeply. God knows her feelings were, in fact, fathomless. She did not cry because her reaction to pain

was not self-pity. Her solution for sorrow, sadness, or suffering was simple, she screamed, and she screamed, and she screamed. "FUCK OFF, FERAL F. FORRESTER," she shouted several times until she finally realized he had, in all fairness, already "fucked off."

And because their good bye had not been an embrace filled with tender moments to remember Mona walked away from the church that day feeling bitter and betrayed, while Feral flew out of Raven Rock on a jumbo jet with his wife feeling free. Feral forgot the feelings he had for Mona in such a short time that one could almost accuse him of being shallow. Mona, on the other hand, would remember for the rest of her life how an unfriendly fate had hurled her in her wedding gown against a wall, all the while expecting her to break like a china cup. Yet, it would seem that she was only chipped, for she swore to herself that some day she would get Feral back and even years later when it became even less of a possibility she forced herself to go on believing so. "I do not care about life anymore. I would suffer a thousand painful deaths to win you over." she had declared to herself on what was supposed to have been her wedding day, but now with the passing of time and with the death of her innocence she remembered it more in the realm of a funeral.

After Feral "fucked off" it took Mona many months to get over her desire to die. Her "cravings," as she called them, to commit suicide continued to plague her, but she was a strong believer in an afterlife and the possibility of their being a spirit world prevented her from taking the plunge. The things she read about reincarnation and karma kept her from attempting to end her life for a short while, but she often fantasized about tricking fate by falling off a bridge or a building. Perhaps, she could trip in front of a transport truck or a train? She hated her life and the world around her so much she waited eagerly everyday for death to come of it's own accord. One might even say she had a welcome mat on her doorstep for death that said, "Come in."

She did not take enough of the sleeping pills, prescribed by her doctor, to kill herself, but she took more than enough to make herself sick. "Being born again could be even more catastrophic," she slurred to her plants, who had tried their best to reason with her. "I'm going to miss you all. I'm going for a swim in the ocean now," she said in a stupor just before staggering out of her apartment and onto the street. The ocean was only a ten minute walk away, but she never made it much further than the front door of her apartment building.

"I will never come back..." she mumbled moments before passing out on the pavement.

Two pedestrians spotted her sprawled out on the sidewalk and phoned the police. An ambulance took her to the hospital where an unsympathetic intern pumped her stomach and sent her up to the psychiatric ward. When she awoke the intravenous in her arm told her that she had not died, while the same ache in her broken heart told her that she had not been born again.

She refused to see a psychiatrist, so they released her with more reason to be unhappy than ever before. She had found out that she was nine weeks pregnant. Feral had left her nine weeks ago. "It must have been the last time we made love when conception occurred. The night before the wedding that didn't take place," she said to herself just outside the hospital.

On her way home she purchased her first pack of cigarettes. The only pack she would ever smoke in her entire life. She stopped at the liquor store and picked up a bottle of vodka even though she did not drink, but the six glasses she gulped down prior to performing the abortion helped to ease the physical and the psychological pain. The cigarettes she chain smoked took her mind off the matter even more. She knew that giving herself an abortion in the privacy of her apartment was dangerous, but she did not care. She did not want his baby. First she filled the bathtub with hot water. Then she smoked another cigarette. Then she straightened the coat

hanger; and squatting in the tub she started to scrap at the wall of her uterus. Soon after it seemed that she was successful in setting the fetus free, but in doing so she had unknowingly punctured herself severely.

She put the one inch long fetus into a jar that she filled with formaldehyde. Then she went back into the bathroom and drained the tub. She had just stepped into the shower when she noticed the steady stream of her bright red blood going down the drain. "So what," she said, but the bleeding would not stop, so she dried herself off, called a cab, and went back to the hospital. This time they insisted she stay and speak with a psychiatrist.

A week later she was at home watering her plants when she suddenly stopped what she was doing before she was even half done. She decided it was time to do two things. One, read the letter that Feral had sent her. Two, take a close look at the fetus. With a magnifying glass she was able to see that it's tiny teeth had started to form. She also found what appeared to be a penis and his facial features had begun to faintly form as well. She decided to call the fetus "FRENZY," for a frenzy was the state of mind she'd been in ever since Feral "fucked off." In fact she put a label on the jar that read, FRENZY FORRESTER, and then she set the jar on a shelf in plain sight for safe keeping. "One day your father will come back and when he does I'll make him pay dearly for deserting us both," she swore to their extremely small son.

Presently she went into her bedroom and opening one of her dresser drawers she looked at the loathsome letter that was lying there alongside some of her lingerie. It was from Feral. He had sent it to her not long after leaving her at the altar. She had never read it. Until now she did not want to hear his excuse for deserting her the way he did. Except for Frenzy and a very poor picture of Feral in a fireman's uniform the letter was all she had left of their love affair. She felt revived enough to read it now and curiosity overcame her contempt.

Dear Mona, I am sorry I had to leave you like I did. I'm not sure how to tell you this for I know that you are going to hate me no matter what I say, but I might just as well come right out and say it. I am married. I am so sorry to have hurt you as I know I have. Please find it in your heart to forgive me. I know you can, for no one I know is more loving than you. Jane, my wife, wants me to move with her to Washington DC. I'm meeting her in the morning, but by the time I mail this letter I will be gone. Even if I had wanted to I could not have married you for I was already married. Again, I am sincerely sorry. All my love, your friend, forever Feral F. Forrester.

P.S. Watch out for those winding highways.

Even if I had wanted to? Mona thought to herself, and now she was even more miserable than ever before. For no particular reason, other than the obvious, she placed the letter along with the picture of Feral under the jar that contained Frenzy, the fetus.

As the days went by she could not help looking occasionally towards the shelf and thinking about "the baby that could have been." She blamed the fact that Frenzy was bottled up in a jar entirely on Feral, and resentment as well as a certain amount of regret rose in her until it reached a point of no return. Also she could not stop herself from thinking about Jane. She wondered what her last name was before it became Forrester? Jane Forrester, Feral's loving and devoted wife, she thought. "THE MOTHER OF MY MADNESS," she screamed in an irrational way. "SEE JANE RUN. SEE JANE, THE JEZEBEL, GET HER JUST DESSERT. SEE JANE FALL OFF A BUILDING OR A BRIDGE. SEE JANE TRIP IN FRONT OF A TRANSPORT TRUCK OR A TRAIN. SEE JANE DOE DIE!"

That was the day that Mona decided meeting another man might mend her broken heart and help her to finally get over Feral, so she bought herself a low cut crimson colored dress and went

to the roadhouse in Raven Rock. She had never been before. She had never been with anybody but Feral.

Most of the men at the roadhouse had seen her around town. They knew that she was not the type to be seen in such a place, so they were surprised when she strolled through the front door with an attitude of total abandonment.

They were even more surprised when she took home the first man to buy her a drink. On Mona's behalf, Dino, was a doll. At least on the outside he was decidedly delicious. His legs were solid, and sturdy, and strong like stumps of steel, and Mona liked to lick their entire length. She licked his masculine, muscular, manly chest, mainly because he liked it; his back, his bottom, and his balls, because he begged her to, and his toes, because he told her to. Dino was not only her first fuck after Feral he was also the first man to fuck Mona in the face. It was, in fact, the first time she had taken a penis into her mouth, but she sucked on his cock like a kid with a craving for candy.

"I have a friend," Dino declared right after they had finished fucking, so the following night Mona returned to the roadhouse in a pair of skin tight purple pants to meet Dino and his friend. The following night there was a full moon and they put together a foursome. When the weekend came she went with five of Dino's "friends" and in a frenzy she fucked them all. As though that were not enough to prove that she was a self-destructive damsel in distress she went with Dino to a bachelor party where she reportedly performed fellatio on more than fifty men. She finally decided she would prefer to get paid for any future performances, so with Dino's help she plunged into prostitution. Although Dino was able to find her a few regular johns, Raven Rock was not a large enough place to support the profession, so on the day of her twenty first birthday she decided to leave town. Dino was throwing another one of his parties, without pay, and he was expecting her to entertain. During their brief time together Mona had found out that Dino was not only divorced and the father of two children he was a drug addict and recently he had taken to shooting cocaine as opposed to just snorting the stuff. On more than one occasion she had watched him jab a needle into his arm over and over again. Now, as she watched him do it the thrill of witnessing something dangerous and illegal was gone, and furthermore she could not count the number of times he had tried in the last twenty minutes to hit one of his collapsed veins. "You don't even know what you're doing. You're so damn desperate to get that crap into your already screwed up system," she said, and because he had not remembered her birthday she became even more upset. It does not matter, she thought to herself while watching him attack his other arm with the syringe, for she was planning on leaving this very evening; and since she no longer aspired to perform at one of his parties without pay, and since she no longer found pleasure in having Dino screw her in the mouth, she screamed, "GO DO THAT IN THE BATHROOM, YOU FUCKING IDIOT, AND CLEAN YOUR BLOOD UP OFF THE CEILING WHEN YOU'RE DONE." No doubt about it Mona's mind was made up. She decided she would dump Dino, and she did not do it delicately. "Pack your bags, you pimp, and get out of my apartment," was all she had to say upon his return from the bathroom.

"I ain't goin' nowhere, bitch."

"Suit yourself, I'm leaving tonight for L.A."

Dino snarled and grabbed the cocaine he'd stashed in the Sansevieria snake plant. He stopped by the front door and on the spur of the moment he pulled a miniature palm tree out of its pot and hurled it at Mona, for he knew that this, more than anything else, would make her mad. She did not say a word, but if looks could kill Dino would have died sooner than he did, which was

two days later of an accidental overdose.

Mona apologized to the palm tree while replanting it and then she telephoned a local greenhouse where she had made previous arrangements with the owner for someone to come and pick up all her plants. "They will take good care of you. Mommy has to go away for a while."

On the plane, Mona dreamed about becoming a movie star in Hollywood. She would use her fame and fortune to fight for the environment something she had not been involved in ever since Feral "fucked off." Even though she had stopped going to environmental meetings she was as concerned as ever; and she might even have become a movie star if she'd given herself half a chance.

"What do you do?" the casting agent asked not long after her arrival.

"Nothing," Mona said.

"Can you dance?"

"No."

"Can you sing?"

"No."

"Can you act?"

"No."

"Well, you are beautiful," the casting agent told her. "But..."

So subsequently two weeks later a trick on Hollywood Boulevard asked her several of the same questions. "What do you do?"

"Everything from a to z, except for k-i-s-s-i-n-g. NOW HURRY UP AND PICK A LETTER."

"Can you sing and dance 'I'm a good ship lollipop' like Shirley Temple?" asked the trick. *

Returning to Raven Rock, two years and approximately two thousand tricks later, Mona left Los Angeles with a lot of excess baggage that would take her several years to unload. If Feral's leaving her at the altar had caused the death of her innocence Los Angeles had left her devoid of all naivety. Meanwhile she finally found a buyer for the farmland she had inherited from her mother and father. She used the money to buy herself a small store on the main street of town. There was an unfurnished one bedroom apartment above the store that belonged to her as well, so she moved in immediately. She told everyone who knew her that her name was now Mrs. Martyrelli. She even wore a wedding ring. "I got married while I was away, but now I am a widow," she informed the residents of Raven Rock. "Mr. Martyrelli, my husband, drowned in the Polar Sea while trying to save some seals from being slaughtered."

"She told me her husband was killed by a poacher in Africa when he jumped in between an elephant and an ivory hunter?" one resident of Raven Rock remembered.

"I could swear she said he set himself on fire at an anti-fur demonstration in Detroit?" another resident recalled.

"I heard he was shot by an unknown assailant while protesting a pulp and paper mill in British Columbia, Canada?"

"Hogwash, I heard she was a harlot in Hollywood," another resident repeated the rumor that was already racing around Raven Rock from a reliable source.

She got her plants back from the greenhouse just in time to celebrate her twenty third birthday. They were very glad to see her. She baked herself a sesame seed cake and after she iced it she carried it into the living room. She placed it on the floor, for she had decided not to

buy any furniture. She liked the ascetic look, and life, so the only luxury she allowed herself was a clock radio, pots, pans, dishes, and a mattress on the floor. Her only other possessions were her precious plants. She spent all of her spare time getting things ready for the health food store she was going to open downstairs. She was going to specialize in vegetarian products and there was already a sign on the front window that said, NO MEAT FOR SALE. Someone, likely the resident that started the rumor and probably a regular at the roadhouse wrote: "That's right, she already sold it."

After getting some birthday candles from her kitchen cupboard she went back into the living room where she saw a cockroach crawling in the icing of the cake. She did not kill it. She watched him scurry across the floor. She placed twenty three candles on her cake and she thought deeply about the past two years of her life as she lit them. They were tumultuous years to say the least. All the men she had met in Los Angeles had turned into nothing more than miserable memories and she wished, as she blew out the candles on her cake, that she was a magician so she could make all the men in her life disappear. "Damn each and every one of them," she said to herself.

She looked at Frenzy on the floor beside her. She had kept him all this time. She had carried the jar with her to Los Angeles and had brought it diligently back to Raven Rock.

A week later with the opening of her store underway, she went so far as to say, "In my mind, men are monsters, and most of them make me sick." It wasn't so much a sexual statement as it was an environmental one, for Mona threw herself back into the realm of environmental meetings. "Save the Planet from Destruction," she said to every customer that came into her store. "Save the Planet from Destruction," several signs in the shop said. "SAVE THE PLANET FROM DESTRUCTION," she shouted with many other men and women over and over again at a political peace rally in Raven Rock.

To be totally truthful though, there was definitely a certain amount of resentment towards men on a more personal level when she said that most of them make her sick. Mona not only hated mankind as a whole, she hated individual specimens just as passionately. She hated them, because they had the power to hurt her. She hated them, most of all, because she wanted one. "Having your heart broken hurts, and O man, how I hate that hurt," she said on several occasions.

O man was a saying she had picked up on Hollywood Boulevard; and her reason for using the expression on such a regular basis even now in rural Raven Rock? O man were the letters of her name rearranged.

Every time she thought about Feral not showing up at the church, she said, "O man."

When a prostitute came up to her on the street and told her about another prostitute's life threatening problems with some pimp, Mona had said, "O man."

When another prostitute told her about some psycho trick that was strangling hookers on Hollywood Boulevard, she said, "O man."

And when yet another prostitute, whose name was Pandora, came up to her one night and complained about being beaten up by her boyfriend, Mona had sympathetically said, "O man."

And when she saw a picture in a wildlife magazine of an oil polluted penguin, she said, "O man." When she read on the next page about the human encroachment on the Antarctica, perhaps the last pristine place on the planet, she said, "O man." Then when she read an article in the magazine about mankind being the only creature that directly or indirectly kills every species on the planet all the way from ants to whales, Mona said, "O MAN," but this time she said it

with a vengeance, and over the course of the next two years, up until the time of her arrest, she would find herself saying it so many times she seriously considered changing her name to O anything else. *

"Good morning, Mona," the plants called to their mistress who was lying on the mattress in the middle of the living room. "Happy birthday to you..." they started to sing. "Happy birthday, dear Mona, happy birthday to you."

It was drizzling rain. In the winter the west coast of Washington State would not be the same if it wasn't wet, Mona thought, and because rainstorms in Raven Rock always reminded her of the head on car crash, not only did the drizzle depress her, for a while it made her wish wholeheartedly that she were dead. The twenty five candles burning brightly on her birthday cake she had bought late in the afternoon of that drizzly day convinced her to try to come up with a more worthwhile wish. World peace? Nuclear disarmament? An end to pollution? "I wish Feral would come back," she said, even though she tried desperately to stop herself from saying it. More often than not her head was still filled with fantasies about Feral: a telephone call from across the country late one night, a love letter lost in the mail, which finally arrives and reunites them, an apology, a telegram admitting he'd made the worst mistake of his life and that he wanted to marry her after all was, next to a familiar knock on the door, her favorite fantasy. While waiting for anyone of them to happen she watched the rain fall against her window. She took a deep breath, blew out the candles on the cake, and because she knew her wish would not come true, she cried. Her sobbing started so suddenly she did not even realize she had burst into tears until she noticed her face was wet, and it wasn't from the rainwater leaking in through the window.

It had been five years since Feral F. Forrester had "fucked off," but she could remember his face as clearly as she could recall her own. Will I always love him? she asked herself. Will the memory of him haunt me forever? Will we ever get back together? Perhaps, she told herself, in twenty thirty forty fifty or five hundred years from now? The day before she had asked him to marry her she had made a girlish list of all the things she loved the most about him. His face. His features. His wavy black hair. His name, because it was unique. The way he made love topped her list. Then she had made a short list of all the things she disliked the most. The way he wasted water when he shaved or brushed his teeth. The after shave he used, for it was made from the musk glands of dead deer. His full length leather coat. The way he ate in a restaurant, and what he ate annoyed her even more than his bad table manners. He was a meat eater, who would not even consider attending even one "Meat Eaters Anonymous" meeting. "That is all behind you now," Mona bravely said to herself, but presently on a piece of paper she made another list of all the things she had learned to loath about Feral her first and only love. The fact that he left her at the altar was number one. The fact that he had lied to her all along came second. The fact that he did not love her anymore came third. The fact that he probably never did came fourth. The fact that she still loved him came as no surprise to her, but it was the thing she loathed the most.

The rain stopped just in time for Mona, and many other residents of Raven Rock to see the sun shine for a short while before it set. Since there was a haze on the horizon there was absolutely nothing seductive about the sunset, so Mona moved away from the window. She wiped away her tears and then she took it upon herself to write to the "rat."

Dear Feral, I promised myself years ago that I would never write to you, but now for the sake of our son I find that I am forced to put my feeling of resentment aside. Someone has to take care of Frenzy in the event that I am caught. Frenzy, in case you are wondering, is your son, and

he is the cutest little thing in the world. I never told you about him before, because I have never been able to fully forgive you for fucking off on me. But yes, Feral F. Forrester, you are a father. An absent and an insensitive one, but a father just the same. We lived in Los Angeles for two years, but Frenzy decided he did not like it there, so we returned to Raven Rock two years ago today. I have just turned twenty five. Wish me a happy birthday. Anyway, the reason I'm writing this letter is that when I was in Los Angeles a trick told me that your wife, Jane, can't have children. He also informed me that you are still a firefighter, but now instead of fighting forest fires in the Washington woods you are putting out the burning buildings in the countries capital. Why bother when one day they will all burn. This trick of mine also happened to mention that Jane has her sights set on becoming President of the United States one day. I think there should be a woman in the White House. I'm sure you're dying to know who this trick was, so I will tell you. It was her gynecologist. He was in Los Angeles for a medical convention. Anyway, I was thinking that since she is infertile perhaps the two of you would like to adopt Frenzy?

In case you are at all curious about how I became a prostitute I think one of the reasons was to pay you back, but now through hindsight I know that I only hurt myself. Every time I turned a trick I thought about you. In my mind we have made love many times since you left and in my dreams you are even better in bed if that is possible. Sometimes lying alone late at night I think of myself as a forest fire. A fire that you extinguished. You smothered the flame that burned so brightly between us, you bastard. Why, why did you lie to me? Why did you give me love and then take it away? My hatred has made me realize that my fixation with you is a lot like your fixation with fires. I remember you once told me that each time you conquer a fire you feel like you're getting something out of your system. Well, as hard as I try you are still in my system, so all I can do, you son of a bitch, is suffer. Even though it's been five years since I've seen you I think that I love you more than ever. Perhaps, it's because I can't have you? But I am more inclined to believe that it is because no one has ever loved me, or moved me, as deeply as you did and still do, my darling. Damn you, anyhow. I have a confession to make. I called your house once in Washington DC. Jane answered, so I slammed the receiver down. It was probably for the best that you didn't pick up the phone. Jane sounded very sweet I must say, but I'm curious about one thing. Have her teeth fallen out yet? No. Well I guess my spell didn't work. Perhaps I'll try another one? How do you feel about fat women? I'm still beautiful by the way, and I would have been a beautiful bride. Did you know that the wedding dress that I paid fifteen hundred dollars for was gold colored and it was the most gorgeous gown in the shop. Right after you left I ripped it to shreds. Did you love me Feral? Did you love me even for one moment? I doubt it, but hardly a day goes by that I don't ask myself, did he love me? He loves me? He loves me not? He leaves me? He leaves me not? Well, you may have left me and you may not love me, but you can not stop me from loving you and I am going to love you for the rest of my life. Not even you can take that away from me. Sometimes, my dear, I daydream that I am swimming out in the ocean. I'm as seductive as the sun in the South Pole when suddenly I'm surrounded by sharks and Feral F. Forrester falls into the infested waters to save me from my most unfortunate fate. Farewell.

P.S. Been in any car crashes lately?

The idea of telling Feral that Frenzy was alive came to her in Los Angeles when she found out that Jane was infertile. It was within her power now to give Feral something and then take it away. The hopes of having a son. Standing by the window she was filled with a feeling of self-satisfaction. She sealed the letter securely in an envelope and she was getting ready to lick

the stamp when there was a loud knock on her door.

"I wonder who that is?" she said and she was watching the last sliver of sun sink into the ocean when she said it.

"It's the police," said the African violet.

Raven, Rebecca, Rabbit, and Ruth are all at Raven Manor when the message comes from Pigeon that Raven is being summoned by Mother Nature. "And she wants to see you immediately. You are being charged with writing a book," says Pigeon.

Rabbit and Ruth complain when Pigeon tells them that they also have to testify at the trial. Mr. Wolf, Bachelor Buck, and Mr. Bear are told they will be witnesses as well.

"You are all expected to be at the top of Mount Saint Helens by dusk tomorrow. We will meet here at Raven Manor in the morning. Don't be late," Pigeon warns them and then he flies away without another word.

"I was expecting as much," Raven says to Sea Gull early the next day.

"Well you can count on me to testify on your behalf," Sea Gull assures his friend.

"Thank you," Raven says. "I'm sure I will need all the support I can get."

"What are you going to say?" Sea Gull asks.

"I have no idea."

"I can't help wondering what she has in store for you? I've heard horror stories about how vindictive she can be."

"Yes, I've heard those same stories," Raven replies.

"How is Rebecca taking the news?"

"Not too well I'm afraid. She's very upset. I don't think she slept at all last night. She's getting dressed for the trial as we talk."

It is a sunny day. Raven and Sea Gull are sitting out in the backyard on the edge of the bird bath. "The others should be here soon," Sea Gull says.

"I hope so. It's quite a hike from here to Mount Saint Helens. It is going to take us all day," Raven remarks, as he rises to his feet to fix the tie he is wearing for the trial.

Mr. Bear, Bachelor Buck, and Mr. Wolf all arrive at the same time. They wander over to the bird bath where they wait with Raven and Sea Gull for Rebecca to finish getting ready. When she comes into the backyard she is wearing a colorful cotton dress, a big floppy hat, and she is carrying a picnic basket. "I made some sandwiches for the trip," she tells everyone.

Pigeon promptly appears, for he has been perching on the roof of Raven Manor. "Everyone follow me," he orders to those who are present. "Where are Rabbit and Ruth?" he demands.

"They said they were going to meet us in the woods," Raven says.

"Fine. Then let us be off."

Rabbit and Ruth periodically peek through the curtains on their kitchen window, for the path that passes by their place is the route that Raven, Rebecca, and the others will take. According to the clock on their kitchen wall it is seven o'clock when Rabbit and Ruth see the assemblage of animals shuffle by, but by the time they catch up with their friends it is seven thirty five, for Rabbit felt like fornicating.

"At least the weather is nice," Ruth says to Rebecca.

"She can be very nice when she wants to be," Bachelor Buck comments, and at first all the animals think he is speaking only of the weather, until they each figure out for themselves individually that what he is really referring to is Mother Nature's personality.

"Which is sometimes one in the same," Sea Gull says.

"Yes, she can be very kind when she wants to be," Mr. Wolf agrees whole-heartedly. "She saved me from starving to death one winter when I was just a pup. She changed herself into the form of a rabbit and allowed me to eat her."

"How very nice for you," Rabbit retorts with a raised eyebrow. Then he moves in between Mr. Wolf and Ruth who is very appreciative of the gesture.

"She can also be as nasty as the night," Rebecca points out in regards to Mother Nature's mood swings.

"You're right, Rebecca, she could stir up a storm this instant strong enough to send us all sailing out across the sea from where we stand," Bachelor Buck offers.

"Worse than that she could turn us into toads," Mr. Bear bellows.

"And why would that be so bad?" Mr. Frog asks as the congregation of animals go by, for he just happens to be sitting on a lily pad in the pond that they are in the process of passing. "Some of my best friends are..."

"Our apologies, Mr. Frog," Raven calls to his amphibious four legged friend.

"Oh, it's quite all right. I'm afraid I haven't been feeling well," Mr. Frog informs the animals that have stopped walking and have gathered into a group.

"What's the matter?" Ruth asks.

"Can't you tell? This pond is polluted. Why look at the filthy foam all around the edges."

It is true. The perimeter of the pond is covered with what can best be described as smelly brown bubbling sludge.

"Why don't you move?" asks Mr. Wolf.

"This is my home. I was born here, Mr. Wolf, and besides all the ponds in the area are polluted."

"Is there anything that we can do?" Raven eagerly asks.

"I don't suppose there is anything that any of us can do," says Mr. Frog.

The animals walk away in silence, and they do not speak for quite some time. Finally, Bachelor Buck solemnly articulates what is on each and everyone of their minds. "The humans are solely responsible. They have been dumping all kinds of garbage into the river in Raven Rock for years. That is why the ponds are polluted. And just last month I heard that Mother Nature herself was feeling ill. She had a horrendous headache."

Raven has to laugh. "I am sure that the garbage being dumped into one river is not the only reason she has a headache. I would imagine she is sick from all the garbage being dumped all over the world, and all over the ecosystem. Into the land. Into the air. Into the sea... I could go on for days."

"Oh, please don't," Ruth implores, "or I will get a headache."

"You are right, though, Bachelor Buck," Raven states, ignoring Ruth's ignoramus remark, "the pollution on the planet is the problem and it is bothering her and that is one reason why I am writing the book, so I don't understand why she's upset?"

"Because, as any fool can tell you, birds aren't supposed to write books. Book writing belongs to the human being. Evolution left us behind." Mr. Bear surprises the group of animals present by his observations, for he is not known for being the most brilliant bear in the

Washington woods. And right now he impresses his friends further by giving Raven a skeptical look from the corner of one eye and remarking, "Mankind is the most knowledgeable animal on earth." He must be on a roll, Raven thinks to himself, yet he can't help wondering if it is as simple as mankind being the elite of evolution, because after his tiresome trip across the country he realized that nothing is ever as simple as it seems. With his own eyes he saw there are no simple solutions for the problems plaguing the planet. And furthermore, after all of his extensive reading and research, the reason for the rise of the human race was still a riddle.

Just before they are about to turn inland they come to an inlet by the sea where they bump into Mr. Otter, who good-naturedly asks, "Where in the world are all of you going?"

"We've been summoned to see Her Majesty," Ruth replies.

"Mother Nature," Raven explains.

"Oh my. Oh my," says Mr. Otter.

Pigeon who has been flying overhead for the entire trip is not pleased that he has to turn back once again when the animals stop to talk with some silly sea otter, especially since they just spent fifteen minutes socializing with a frigging frog. "Raven and Rebecca, it would be much faster if you flew."

"Of course it would be much faster if we flew, but not all of us have wings, so we will walk with our friends, Mr. Pigeon." It is not until he is good and ready, until he is finished chatting with Mr. Otter, whom he hasn't seen since Puff's funeral, that he willingly allows himself to be further escorted by Pigeon.

"Stubborn bird," Pigeon mutters to himself.

"Mr. Otter, if you happen to see Mr. Whale today will you ask him to meet me in the bay by Raven Manor tonight? Tell him that it's terribly important that I talk with him."

"Of course, Raven, anything that I can do to help, and the best of luck with Mother Nature."

At noon hour they stop to eat the assortment of sandwiches that Rebecca was thoughtful enough to bring. Rebecca, it seems, is upset, because Pigeon's wife, Penelope, has been tagging along for the last hour. Penelope is a flirt and her feelings for Raven have never been more obvious. Rebecca has nothing to fear, however, for Raven finds Penelope's flirtatious behavior and her faded feathers totally unattractive. As he eats his sandwich in silence he does his best to ignore the passes made by Penelope, for he knows how hot-headed Rebecca can become when she is jealous. Ever since he was caught kissing Miss Robin at last year's New Year's Eve party he has learned to save his kisses for Rebecca's beak.

"Sea Gull, how is Sally?" Rebecca inquires once they have all finished eating and are enroute once again for Mount Saint Helens.

"Didn't I tell you? Sally got a job as a waitress in Raven Rock at some resort that specializes in seafood."

"You don't sound pleased?"

"No, Rebecca, I suppose I'm not. We don't get to spend very much time together."

"That's too bad, but the two of you will have to come again for dinner some time," Rebecca says.

Suddenly Mr. Bear, by far the biggest in the group, but as said before far from being the brightest of the bunch, makes a comment about Mother Nature's ability to change forms, which frightens several of the animals. "It's really remarkable the way she can change forms as fast as a fly can fly. I bumped into her once when she was a lady bug and before I knew it, right before my eyes, she transformed herself into the biggest black bear I have ever seen."

"Yes, her metamorphic power is quite remarkable," Bachelor Buck agrees. "I've seen her in the guise of just about every animals imaginable. A whale, a wild cat, a dolphin, and a deer much like myself."

"I'm told that most of the time she tends to be a tree, but I don't know if it's true?" Raven says.

"That's nothing," Rabbit remarks, "I've seen her go from a butterfly to a bigfoot to a baby bald headed eagle and back to a butterfly all in a matter of moments."

"She must have been showing off," one of the animals say.

"She was, I'm sure," Rabbit is convinced.

"I wonder what she'll be during the inquisition?" Mr. Wolf says.

"Something very big and frightful," Mr. Bear believes.

"A dinosaur," Ruth declares.

"You don't suppose?" Rebecca asks.

"I don't thinks she does dinosaurs," Raven replies, but if she can do a bigfoot, he would have to say that perhaps anything is possible.

"Oh, she'll probably be something symbolically stupid like a wise old owl," says Mr. Bear.

"Hoot. Hoot."

"Did you hear that?" Ruth stops and asks everyone.

"Oh dear, me and my big mouth," cries Mr. Bear.

"Mr. Owl, we were talking about Mother Nature," Raven tries to explain. "Nothing personal. We're on our way to an inquisition of sorts."

Mr. Owl swoops down from the tree branch where he has been watching this strange array of animals for quite some time. Now, he joins the group. "Would any of you mind if I tag along? I'm very bored. My wife, Henrietta, has been at her mother's all week."

"We would love your company," Raven assures him. "Wouldn't we Mr. Bear?"

"It would be an honor to have you along," says Mr. Bear guiltily.

"We were just wondering what Her Highness might be during the trial?" Ruth informs Mr. Owl.

"Really, Ruth, you shouldn't call her anything but Mother," Rabbit reprimands.

"Her Highness? Her Majesty? Mother Earth? Mother Nature? What difference does it make? I don't mean any of them disrespectively."

"I know that, but not everyone else does," Rabbit tells her.

"It is difficult to say what Her Highness might be," Mr. Owl comments purposefully as a way to avoid an argument he feels is forthcoming between Rabbit and Ruth. "Does any of this have to do with the book I'm hearing so much about?" he quickly adds.

"It does indeed. It does indeed," Raven reiterates.

"How many of you think she'll be in the form of her favorite animal?" Rabbit tosses the question into the woods the way one would throw a ball, but unlike a ball that has to obey the law of gravity, the question bounces back and forth from animal to animal. For one creature to claim favor over another creature would be foolhardy, they all agree, but they have to wonder what Mother Nature had on her mind when she made man, who in their collective opinion is the most miserable and worthless of them all.

"Maybe she had a headache that day?" Bachelor Buck jokes, and they all burst into laughter.

"A migraine," Ruth says sarcastically, and they laugh some more at mankind's expense.

"I don't think Mother Nature has a favorite," Raven remarks. "I once heard her comment,

when she was an earth worm, that all creatures are created equal."

"Surely not humans too?" Ruth gasps.

"Only He or She who made Mother Nature knows for sure," observes Mr. Owl.

"Someone made Mother Nature?" Who?" asks Mr. Bear bewildered.

"God. You big lump of lard," says Mr. Wolf.

"It's possible, but there's no proof," Raven interjects. "I can tell you, though, that human beings are no better than hummingbirds, and ravens are no better than rabbits, and owls are no better than bears..." and so on he states several different species.

"Do you really think so?" Rabbit asks.

"I know so," Raven replies with complete conviction.

"He's absolutely right," Sea Gull says.

"I suppose so," Ruth says. "We're just different."

"And delightfully so," says Bachelor Buck.

"I always thought that whales were her pet project, because they are the biggest and they've been around for so long?" wonders Mr. Bear.

"Sharks have been around for a long time too?"

"That only means, Mr. Wolf, that as a species they have survived longer than some," Raven informatively replies.

"What would you be if you could choose?" Sea Gull looks right at Raven and asks.

Raven thinks for a moment before he answers. "I suppose I would pick the foremost part of every animal."

"Give us an example," Ruth demands.

"Well, I might be as big as a whale, with the memory of an elephant, with the strength of a bear, with the wings of a bird, with the mind of a man, with the gentle disposition of let us say a lamb."

"And what would you call yourself?" Mr. Wolf asks in a somewhat scornful way.

"A conglomerate creature?" Raven replies uncertainly.

"Really, Raven, I can understand why you would want to be as big as a whale, with the wings of a bird, and all the rest, but why in the world would you want the mind of a man?" Rebecca asks her husband.

"Man's mind is the most evolved," Raven replies. "His has the ability to reason."

"I do hope that Mother Nature is not in the form of a human being," Ruth says fearfully.

"I think..." Mr. Bear starts to say, but Pigeon flies overhead and drops some dung which lands directly on Mr. Bear's back. "I think, you are all a bunch of crack pots, now move along," Pigeon warns.

All the animals, including Mr. Bear, try their best to ignore Pigeon's presence by casually carrying on with their conversation.

"If that's true, Raven, then why was Mother Nature so mad when the whales were being wiped out, when the baby seals were being slaughtered? Whenever man interferes with nature, Mother creates one hurricane, twister, tornado, earthquake, volcano, fire, or avalanche after another," says Bachelor Buck.

"That's right, Raven, why doesn't she become upset when humans die in mass amounts. I heard old Mr. Turtle tell a terrific - or rather a horrific tale about the last big war the humans had and when that Hitler man murdered millions of people, reportedly, Mother Nature did not even blink, but was quoted as saying, 'It is out of my hands,' or 'They brought it about

themsevl'es,' or something like that."

"Bachelor Buck is right, Raven, I remember my great great grandfather, William Wolf, tell me that when the humans dropped those nuclear bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki again Mother Nature said, 'It is out of my hands,' and 'There is nothing that I can do.'"

Raven has no immediate reply, but he remembers something Puff told him and he repeats it to his friends. "'Humans bring about their own bad luck,'" Puff had pointed out. "They are the makers of their own misery and most of their misfortunes."

"And most of ours," is Raven's response both then and now.

"In many ways the humans have become more powerful than Mother Nature, and that my feathered friend is part of the problem," Puff said that day, while hiding the fact that he was in an enormous amount of pain, and presently Raven repeats the proclamation word for word.

"We must be nearing the mountain by now," Bachelor Buck complains, for his hooves are starting to hurt.

"Nearing it, we're already on it and halfway to the top," Mr. Bear informs him, for he has been here before.

"Thank goodness," Rebecca says. "My legs are tired."

"Mine are twice as tired," Ruth remarks.

"Hop on my back for the rest of the way," Rabbit says to his wife. "But don't you dare get pregnant," he jokes, and every animal laughs, for they all know that Ruth holds the record for getting pregnant "faster than any fly can fly."

"How much further to the top?" Mr. Wolf wonders out loud.

"What a beautiful, beautiful day," offers the optimistic Mr. Owl.

"My sweet, sweet Sally," Sea Gull starts to sing.

"My hooves hurt like hell," Bachelor Buck complains.

"We've been walking on hard lava for the last mile," Rebecca says.

"I put a lump in my pocket as a souvenir," Ruth announces.

"I hope the mountain doesn't decide to erupt while we're on it," grumbles Mr. Bear.

"Move along," Pigeon pushes and prods.

"It won't be long now," Raven fears.

It is almost dark by the time they reach the summit of Mount Saint Helens. "Mother Nature has been waiting patiently for you slow pokes," Pigeon says, and then he flies away with his wife, Penelope, for his services are no longer needed. "Those fools can find their own way back and can get lost in the bush for all I care," he says to himself.

"Well, where is she?" growls Mr. Bear.

"RAVEN. THANK YOU FOR COMING. I HAVE ASKED YOUR FRIENDS HERE BECAUSE THEY SEEM TO SUPPORT YOU. I WAS GOING TO ALLOW THEM TO TESTIFY ON YOUR BEHALF, BUT I AM FICKLE AND I HAVE CHANGED MY MIND. IT HAS COME TO MY ATTENTION THAT YOU ARE WRITING A BOOK ABOUT THE HUMANS. I HAVE HEARD THAT YOU PLAN ON SENDING IT TO THE PEOPLE IN THE CITY OF NEW YORK? IF THIS IS TRUE THEN IT IS MY DUTY AS YOUR MOTHER, AS THE MOTHER OF ALL CREATURES GREAT AND SMALL, TO WARN YOU THAT IT IS AGAINST THE LAW OF NATURE, YOUR NAMESAKE."

"I hear her, but I can't see her anywhere," says a frightened Rabbit.

"Her voice, it seems to be coming from all over," Bachelor Buck agrees.

"I suspect she is everywhere," Raven whispers.

"YOU ARE RIGHT, RAVEN, I AM THE WIND AND THE STARS AND THE CLOUDS AND THE SUN AND THE WATER AND THE EARTH AND THE MOON AND THE TREES. I AM ALL OF YOU AND ALL OF YOU ARE A PART OF ME. I AM YOUR MOTHER AND YOU MUST NOT DISOBEY ME. IS IT NOT BAD ENOUGH THAT MANKIND HURTS ME? I WILL NOT TOLERATE DISOBEDIENCE FROM A BIRD."

"Mother, allow me to write the book and I will prove to you that my intentions are to inform the hateful humans of their wrongful ways, to enlighten them on your sublime existence, and demand that they stop destroying you. I assure you it is not my intention to turn the animals against you."

"YOU MUST NOT INTERFERE WITH THE EVOLUTION OF MANKIND. NO MATTER HOW UNENLIGHTENED THEY MIGHT BE. I MADE MAN AND..."

"Yes, Mother, you made man, but like Frankenstein man has turned his back on his maker. He has turned against you."

"NOT ALL OF THEM."

"No, but enough. Too many. Is it not true that they are the only species on the planet that causes you distress? The only species that threatens your very life."

"IT IS OUT OF MY HANDS."

"Then allow me to help you," Raven cries, but suddenly a gust of wind knocks him off his feet. The animals panic and cling together when the wind whirling around them begins to blow with a frightening force. It is all any of them can do to keep themselves from flying off into the air, which might be fun for Raven, Rebecca, Sea Gull, and Mr. Owl, but for the rest of them being carried away by the wind would be a rude awakening of not down right disastrous.

Then, as if the wind isn't enough of a worry, the mountain starts to shake. "An earthquake," Bachelor Buck, who is bracing himself as best as he can against a big boulder, cries.

"It's a volcano," Mr. Bear, holding onto Bachelor Buck, bellows, but it isn't an earthquake and it isn't a volcano that vibrates the mountain and the valley below, it is the volume of Mother Nature's voice.

"I HEARBY BAN THE BOOK OF THE BIRD."

"Mother. Mother. Mother," Raven repeatedly calls. "Mother Nature, where have you gone? Come back. Come back. There is more that I want to ask you. There is more that I need to know." Raven continues to call out, but his call is not heard. The wind will not tell him what he wants to know. It goes away without warning and without uttering one more word. The mountain has nothing more to say, for she stops her shaking, and suffice to say she does not spill her guts in any regard.

The animals go back down to the base of Mount Saint Helens with sunken spirits. "But, still alive," says Sea Gull.

"Yes, we were lucky," says Mr. Owl.

"I was terrified," Rabbit tells them.

"It was nothing," boasts Mr. Bear.

"She was in a good mood," Bachelor Buck thinks aloud.

"I'm hungry," says Mr. Wolf.

"Well stop looking look at me," Ruth warns.

"Have a sandwich," Rebecca suggests.

"She banned my book," Raven despairs.

Late that night Mr. Whale is waiting in the bay for Raven. When he sees the big black bird

approaching he swims as near to the shoreline as is safe for him to do. Taking a big breath of the nutritious night air through his blowhole and spurning water all over the place, he says, "Otter told me this afternoon that you wanted to see me?"

Raven is looking at the full moon. He sees several stars in the sky, and his spirits soar, for oh how he loves to fly late at night over the ocean when the moon is full, the tide is high, and the sky is full of stars. Tonight he is too tired to even lift himself up off the ground. Rebecca, he believes, is already in bed and he is looking forward to the luxury of lying down himself. "Yes, thank you for coming, Mr. Whale. I won't keep you from your wife for long. I need your advice."

"What is it, Raven, old friend?"

"Mother Nature has banned the book, like I knew she would, but now I don't know what to do?"

"Why are you asking me?" Mr. Whales wonders.

"Because you are one of my best friends. Because you are one of the most magnificent creatures that I have ever had the pleasure of knowing. Because mankind has been terribly cruel to your kind."

"True, the blood of my ancestors has been spilling into the oceans for several centuries. My aunts and my uncles, my nieces and my nephews, and all of my cousins have been slaughtered. My brother and my sister were both butchered. My parents were murdered by the people of Japan who still look at us as a source of food. They hunt our herds down and they kill us by the hundreds with their harpoons. But, still, I don't see what I can do?"

"You can save yourself, and your sons and your daughters, and their sons and their daughters, and so on," says Raven in the style of a rhapsody.

"But how?" Mr. Whale wants to know.

"I am declaring war upon the human race and I want your help."

Mr. Whales curiosity and combativeness is aroused. He envisions himself having to gather all the whales in the world together into one giant army that somehow will seek vengeance upon the human race, and even though he is not a killer whale he does have a keen sense of survival.

Snickering and shaking his head, Raven says, "No, Mr. Whale I want your input as an endangered species. I want you to read my book. And then let us pray that the pen is mightier than the sword."

MONA'S MISSION

After being interrogated by detective's Manning and Manahan, Mona was taken into another room for finger printing. The simple procedure was made practically impossible because Mona would not cooperate whatsoever. And when they tried to take a mug shot her refusal to look towards the camera made the staff sergeant so mad he had to leave the building. He was afraid he was going to bash "the boisterous bitch." But, instead, he bettered himself with a breath of fresh air and big fat cigar.

After they formally charged her with nine counts of premeditated murder in the first degree they escorted her up to the second floor where she was stripped, searched, and sent for a shower.

Her first night in jail she spent in a cold cell by herself. Curled up like a baby on a slab of cement, to keep warm and to keep herself from crying, she concentrated on communicating with the cockroach that was crawling across the floor looking for crumbs. Was she condemned to spend the rest of her life locked up in a concrete cage? she wondered. It seemed that the walls were already closing in on her. She looked at the lock on the door of her cell, and then she let out a loud claustrophobic cry. Her yelling awakened the two welter weight women in the cell across from her, but Mona paid no attention to their violent threats. Then at midnight the matron guard brought a woman in handcuffs into the jail. Mona recognized her right away. It was Pandora. She had been picked up for soliciting an undercover cop at the roadhouse in Raven Rock.

"Pandora," Mona called to her.

"Mona? Mona Babcock? Is that you?"

"It's me all right."

"I didn't know you were back in Raven Rock?" Pandora said, as the matron pushed her into the cell with the two welter weight women.

Pandora and her cellmates were very concerned when they found out later that Mona was in for murder and not for a simple solicitation charge. At the time, however, they had no idea that the female prisoner across from them was facing at the very least several life sentences.

"Honey, it sure is good to see you. What a fucking pleasant surprise," Pandora said, after settling into her cell.

Mona was just as pleased to see Pandora. "I never dreamed you'd come back to Raven Rock."

"Ah, I needed a change of scenery. The slow pace was appealing. Plus, my mother passed away last month. I came back for her funeral and I decided to stay a while."

Mona, standing by the steel bars of her cell, shook her head and said how sorry she was.

"It was inevitable, the woman was full of cancer. Hey, I'm thinking of going to Seattle. There's a lot of money to be made there, though I hear it's a tough town."

"I quit turning tricks," Mona told her, as she wondered how some place like Seattle could possibly be tougher than Tinsel Town.

"Good for you, I'm glad," Pandora replied. "I wish I could say the same. One day, maybe? Anyway, when are you getting out? How 'bout tomorrow night we go to the roadhouse together for a few drinks or we could go see a movie?"

Mona shook her head. "I don't think I'll be going anywhere for a long, long time."

"What do you mean? What are you in for?"

"Murder," Mona said, and she said it without the slightest amount of sympathy, for the sake of herself, or shame, for the sake of society.

Pandora was extremely surprised. The thought of her killing somebody did not seem possible. Mona had always been a pain in the ass pacifist. She decided it must have been self-defense. "Well, I hope you've got a good lawyer?"

Mona shook her head again. "I'm going to defend myself," she said. Then Pandora noticed for the first time that Mona was showing symptoms of being in a state of shock. One sure sign: she was still shaking her head slowly from side to side. Pandora had seen her upset before, a few years back, on Hollywood Boulevard and she knew what would bring her to her senses better than anybody, but because of the two sets of steel bars that separated them she could not get close enough to slap her friends face.

When Pandora and Mona met they had taken an instant liking to each other and Pandora had immediately fallen into the role of mother in their mother and daughter like relationship. It was befitting since she was several years Mona's senior. In Pandora's opinion Mona Babcock was not only too bright for the streets, she was the most beautiful hooker she had ever seen in Hollywood. At first, however, she refused to believe that Mona's platinum blond hair wasn't bleached until time revealed her roots. "You bitch, you really are a natural blond," Pandora had teased.

"I told you I was."

"Well, whatever your hair color you don't belong out here."

On several more occasions Pandora told her with a meaningful tone of voice that she did not belong on the street, but Mona always had the same sympathetic comeback. "Nobody belongs out here." As a hooker in Hollywood, absorbed in a lifestyle that can best be described as being in the center of hell someone once said, "Often times the only haven for a hooker is another hooker."

"Socrates or Plato?" Pandora had sarcastically suggested, as she blew a latex condom up like a balloon, before breaking it with one of her fake fingernails.

"Oh please, it was probably some penny pinching pervert into watching two of us working girls go at it," Mona laughed, as she suggestively lowered the altar top she was wearing several inches for the benefit of the bald man in the back of the limousine that just drove by.

But, whoever said it was right, because Pandora and Mona became good friends. The fact that they both came from Raven Rock helped to establish the friendship in the beginning, yet it was their life together in Hollywood that held it together. Though they had never actually known each other before, they had gone to the same high school. Pandora was five years older than Mona, so they didn't have much in common until they met by coincidence on a street corner in California.

"Don't you adore the climate?" was one of the first things that Pandora had said after finding out they were from the same small town.

"You know I sort of remember seeing you around Raven Rock," Mona mentioned. "I always thought you got married and moved away."

"Me? I've only ever received indecent proposals. I've never come close to getting married. How 'bout you? Did you leave a boyfriend back home with a broken heart?"

They were strutting their stuff, so to speak, on Hollywood Boulevard at the time. It was an exceptionally slow night. "It was the other way around. He left me at the altar."

"By the way you look I would say it was his loss," Pandora informed her, and hereafter she was very instrumental in helping Mona recover from Feral and from her broken heart. "Mona, you have to get over this man whoever he is? This Feral fellow is poison in your system. Some of the things you say scare me. He's not worth dying for. No man is. Face the facts, girl, the guy doesn't love you. Just how long have you been carrying a torch for the creep? You're a streetwalker. Grow up, girl. For God's sake, get a grip. Take a good look around you. Take a good long look at your own life. Here you are as unhappy as hell on Hollywood Boulevard turning tricks to survive. And where the hell is he? I'll tell you where he is. He's with his wife that's where he is. He's where he wants to be, in bed making love with the woman he loves. Smarten up, sweetheart, if you want to survive?" And that's when she slapped Mona's face.

"But, I love him," Mona had said, and then she had climbed into a car, but not before she heard Pandora shout, "So what? What's love got to do with it?"

In many ways Pandora really was the mother that Mona never had and the mentor that she needed at the time to help her with "the terror" of turning tricks in Tinsel Town.

"Child, you have to get a lawyer," one of the welter weight women in Pandora's cell said. She was a lot older looking than she actually was, and she choked on the stale hand rolled cigarette she was smoking. "You can't defend yourself," she added.

"Who did you kill anyway?" Pandora asked, for she was dying to know every dirty detail.

"A man," said Mona mysteriously.

"A trick?"

"No, just a man."

"I stabbed a guy once," Pandora stated decidedly starting a story of her own. "He picked me up on Park Avenue of all places and he drove me to an underground garage. He was rich, but he tried to rip me off, not to mention rape me. I told him I wanted my money up front, you know "cash on the dash," and I warned him that I wasn't into any rough trade. So what does he do? He starts strangling me. I pulled out my switch blade and stuck him, but that was in New York a long time ago, before I knew you."

"Did he die?" Mona wondered.

"I doubt it," Pandora said. "Unless his wife killed him when he got home?"

In the early hours of the morning Mona was taken to see a judge for a bail hearing which she was automatically denied. Then because of her unbelievably bad behavior in the courtroom, because of her rigid refusal for representation, and because of the nasty nature of her crimes, a sanity hearing was set for the following day to see if she was fit to stand trial.

The next morning Mona showed them just how fit she was with a battle cry that could be heard all throughout the courthouse.

"What the hell just happened in there?" one young attorney asked another young attorney who was coming out of the courtroom where catcalls could still be heard from the crowd sitting inside.

"Some crazy woman just ripped her clothes off on the witness stand. Then she stood up on a chair, naked as a newborn baby, and urinated. I swear to God. After that she smiled and shouted something obscene, something about shitting on all of society."

The lawyer laughed and said, "She sounds like a loony tune."

"I suppose she is. She's confessed to killing nine people. Anyway, the judge slammed his gavel a couple of times. He called for order and he told the bailiff to remove the women. So what does she do? She spits at the judge and then she beats up the bailiff. It took three heavy set security guards to hold her down and drag her bare ass out of the courtroom. Funny thing though she's not that big, but let me tell you she's got a great ass. She's one hot looking lady. Too bad she's a madwoman."

Mona was mad, because the judge would not allow her to defend herself, because she had not been given a chance to say good bye to Pandora, and because they had tried to give her "BACON?" for breakfast, so she started yelling that she was going to kill everyone in the courtroom. "I'LL KILL YOU ALL," she screamed with her eyes bulging and her blood curdling.

"INSECTS," she shouted hysterically at each and everyone of them. *

Enter, not long after, the likes of OZONE LAYER; a lawyer who has lived in Los Angeles all of his life is sick to death of the smog, so a picture of Mona peeing on the front page of the morning newspaper and the following headline: ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVIST MONA BABCOCK'S TRIAL DATE HAS BEEN SET, both caught his attention. He coughed and

continued to read. The woman who decapitated the Mayor of Raven Rock, Mackenzie MacDonald, is said to have stabbed him more than one hundred times. She is also solely responsible for a whole series of strange grisly murders that have shaken the small Washington State town. Now, the mass murderess who terrorized the residents of Raven Rock for two years is making a joke of the judicial system. The young woman sailed start naked through her sanity hearing and she is now scheduled to go before a grand jury. "Her refusal for representation is not going to help her case," the district attorney's office has been quoted as saying.

Ozone finished reading the article and he put the paper down. He inquired about the status of the case by making a couple of long distance phone calls. And after cancelling an appointment with a high paying prospective client, Ozone Layer flew to Washington State to meet the woman in question, and perhaps, he'd offer his skillful services? *

"Wake up! There's somebody here to see you," the matron guard shouted as she unlocked the door of Mona's cell.

It was the middle of the afternoon. Mona was taking a nap. "I was having a nightmare," she said when she saw the guard standing in the doorway of her cell. "I was dreaming about the trial."

"Get up. You have a visitor."

Mona wondered who it could be? It was probably Pandora. She had been by the day before and Mona had made arrangements with the police for Pandora to take over the apartment and store. "It will keep you off the street. And it's no use to me right now. All you have to do is take care of my plants."

Pandora had jumped at the opportunity. "Sounds terrific," she said. "A health food store, hey?"

She fixed her hair as she followed the guard to the visiting area. There was an old man waiting for her whom she had never seen before. As she sat down across from him the first thing she noticed, through the Plexiglass partition that separated them, was how completely colorless his eyes were. She picked up the phone indifferently.

"Hi, my name is Ozone Layer," he said.

"That's an odd name," Mona mumbled into the mouthpiece more to herself, however, than to the old man. Thinking about the actual ozone layer she tilted her head back and looked up towards the sky, but of course all she could see was a cement ceiling staring down at her.

"I am a lawyer..."

"Hallelujah. I don't want a fucking lawyer," she said and then she slammed the phone down, but a desperate pleading in Ozone Layer's pale eyes and his tapping of the Plexiglass partition inspired her to pick it up again.

"Wait... I've come all the way from Los Angeles. And whether you want a lawyer or not the court will appoint you one. He or she will probably not be very good. I, on the other hand, am the best."

Mona realized that the court was going to assign someone to her case against her will, but she planned on not cooperating with the person they picked whomever it was. Perhaps, she should not cooperate with this fellow if he's foolish enough to involve himself? "What's in it for you?" she asked with the same suspicious nature of an animal sniffing something in a snare.

Ozone took a membership card out of his wallet and held up for Mona to read. "Save the Planet from Destruction," the card said. Mona just smiled and nodded her head, which was just the beginning of a long and beautiful friendship. *

As she took the stand she straightened the seam on her very short skirt. Ozone had strongly objected to the outfit she was wearing. He did not believe the see through blouse would help her case one bit. "I want you to wear something less revealing," he told her, but Mona had been adamant about her attire. "They've already seen it all," she said, "so what difference does it make? Besides this is how I dress."

"Place your right hand on the Bible. Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God?"

"I do - swear a lot," Mona said. "So what? What's swearing got to do with it?"

"Be seated, and let the record show the defendant to be a hostile witness."

"You call that hostile, just wait, hotshot."

"State your full name."

"Mona Babcock."

"Mona Babcock, you have been indicted by a grand jury to stand trial on nine counts of premeditated murder in the first degree. Do you fully understand the charges laid against you by the State of Washington?"

"Yes."

"How do you plead?"

"Not guilty, by reason of insanity," answered Ozone Layer.

Mona interrupted the proceedings with a plea of her own. "I am not insane, and I would like to know with what meter can you morons measure my madness? I mean, WHO MEASURES YOURS?"

Judge Mansfield, who was presiding over the case, called Mr. Manderson, the State prosecutor, and Ozone Layer, over to the bench. "Mr. Layer are you quite certain this woman is capable of testifying on her own behalf. I'm not completely convinced she is even capable of standing trial."

"Yes, your Honor, I am completely convinced of my client capabilities," Ozone replied cryptically.

"All right, then let's get on with it," judge Mansfield ordered.

The State prosecutor sauntered self-assuredly over to the witness box where Mona was waiting for the man she would often refer to as "a weasel," adding "no offence to the weasels of course."

"Now, Miss Babcock, my name is Mr. Manderson. Would you be kind enough to tell the court in your own words how you see yourself when you are committing a murder?"

"What do you mean, Mr. Manderson?" a smiling Mona asked. She was in total control, mainly because she did not care about the outcome of the trial. She was apathetic and fatalistic to a fault, though under the circumstances she had every reason to be. No matter what she did or said there was no chance of a release, so she saw no reason to put on an act of remorse or pretend to be someone or something that she wasn't; and therefore every man in the courtroom would later agree that nobody could bat their eyelashes better than Mona Babcock "that beautiful woman sitting in the witness box wearing next to nothing."

"I mean, Miss Babcock, do you see yourself as a saint, as a sinner? Are you on some type of mission and if so who sent you? In statements you made to the police you said you consider yourself a martyr?" The tone of his voice was mocking.

"I'm here, aren't I? I could be at home WATCHING A FUCKING SOAP OPERA," she screamed.

"How long have you been a prostitute?" the prosecutor asked.

"How long have you been one?" Mona wanted to know, for in her opinion: "We are all prostitutes in one way or another. And Mr. Prosecutor, my opinion is the only one that matters to me."

"Let me rephrase the question then. How long have you been selling your body for money?"

"Since the first time that I was paid for having sex," she said smartly.

"And do you enjoy the profession?"

"Objection, your Honor," Ozone, having risen to his feet, said. "First of all, my client is no longer a practicing prostitute and any climaxes my client may or may not have had during the course of her career are completely irrelevant to the prosecutor's case, unless of course he has an ulterior motive for asking?" All of the spectators in the courtroom laughed.

"Objection overruled. The defendant will answer the question," ordered the judge.

"I would rather have sex with a cockroach. At least their dirt is only on the outside. I despised it. Does that answer your question, you creep."

"The defendant will refrain from calling the prosecutor names."

"Would you care to tell the court why you became a prostitute?"

"I can't answer that."

"Why not?"

"I have no idea why I became a prostitute. Possibly, there was something in my mental or emotional make up? Maybe it was a karma obligation that I had to fulfill? I have no idea."

"Perhaps, you can answer this? How many tricks have you turned?"

"I object, your Honor. The number of men is not relevant."

"Overruled. Answer the question."

"Let's see, an average of three tricks per day..." She proceeded to write in the air with her finger on an imaginary piece of paper. "Three, times, three hundred and sixty five, equals, one thousand and ninety five, times, two years, equals, two thousand one hundred and ninety."

"Are you saying that in two short years you slept with over two thousand men, Miss Babcock?"

"I didn't sleep with any of them."

"Tell the court, Miss Babcock, what does that do to a woman's state of mind, to her soul?"

"Objection, your Honor, my client is not a trained psychologist."

Again judge Mansfield overruled Ozone Layer's objection and he ordered Mona to answer the question on the grounds that she could testify on her own state of mind.

"I don't know what it did to my soul or to my state of mind, but I do know that me and every other girl out there earned a God damn degree. Two thousand so called sexual encounters crammed into the time span of two years with men from the ages of fifteen to ninety. Various shapes, sizes, smells, colors, faces, fetishes..." She stood up and shouted, "I DEMAND MY DIPLOMA. I paid my tuition two fold. With flying colors I passed the final exam, for I walked away from the street and survived valedictorian of my class. I earned an A plus. I provided a service. I am not ashamed. I want severance pay. I was a hooker. I am a human being, which means that I too am a TURD ON TWO LEGS THAT CAN TALK." She blew the courtroom a careless kiss that could only be construed by the crowd as a colossal slap across the face. Completely composed she sat back down and waited for the spellbound prosecutor to continue.

"How does your family feel about your chosen profession?"

"You know perfectly well that I have no family."

"That's right, you were an orphan, weren't you?"

"Is that a crime? My parents were both killed when I was a child. What's your point, you prick."

"My point, Miss Babcock, is that you were raised by a Mrs. Manford. Is that not true?"

"Yes," Mona shivered.

"And when she suffered a heart attack as the result of several bee stings on your sixteenth birthday you waited for several hours before calling for help? In fact, you left her lying in a beehive in your back yard while you went swimming with some boy."

"She was a sadistic bitch. I didn't owe her the time of day. She's damn lucky I didn't kill her myself. She spent most of her childhood in a Nazi concentration camp."

"Then I should think you would feel sorry for her?"

"She thought it was kindergarten. America could have used her instead of the A-Bomb to end the war. She even killed Cleopatra, my pet cow, and then she made me eat roast beef sandwiches all summer long."

"What were your plans when you went to Los Angeles?"

"I wanted to become a movie star, like Madonna, but I didn't have any money... Anyway, I became a prostitute instead. I rented a rundown room in West Hollywood that came complete with cockroaches and drug dealers. I didn't care about the cockroaches. The drug dealers were dirtier."

"And for those two years did you practice safe sex?"

"Of course I did. Do I look stupid?" She could vividly remember herself saying this to someone else - Jane's gynecologist. He had been uncertain about being intimate with a woman who had obviously had so many men. Finally she'd cut to the chase and said, "It's a hundred dollars, and don't worry, you idiot, we're not going to get close enough for you to catch anything, not a crab, not even a common cold."

"Do you consider yourself promiscuous?" the prosecutor asked.

"Not anymore," Mona said.

"When you confessed you said you slept with several of your victims?"

"Only when I had to," she replied.

"Up until the time you were arrested you owned and operated a health food store in Raven Rock?"

"Yes, it's on the main street of town and it's the only health food store in Raven Rock, so business was very good. I own the building and I lived in a one bedroom apartment above the store."

"I'm told with over two hundred potted plants?"

"Correct. They kept me company."

"The police also found a human fetus floating in a jar full of formaldehyde?" Some of the more squeamish members of the jury gasped and several of the spectators in the courtroom did so as well. "You gave yourself an abortion didn't you, Miss Babcock? And then you displayed the fetus on a shelf. Why?"

"I wonder if I were Christ would this court still crucify me?" Mona questioned her conspirators.

"Well, madam, you are not Christ. I don't believe you have a Christian bone in your body, so would you care to explain to the court your motives for keeping the fetus?"

"If you must know I kept it to get revenge on Feral."

"The father?"

"That's right, and for the record it is my belief that a baby is not a baby until it is born, until it takes it's first breath of air it is not a being. Anti-abortionists talk on and on about the miracle of life, and yet while they're protesting so vehemently they're stepping on ants, and eating meat, and wearing mink coats, and..."

"You are on trial, not society, so save your recriminating remarks for someone who cares," the prosecutor told her.

"GO FUCK YOURSELF," Mona said, and she said it well, and she would say it again, often in fact, during the course of the trial. She would shout it several times at the judge. She would scream it at the jury. She would say it sweetly, and sarcastically, and once she would even write it in red ink on a piece of paper. Then she would mold the paper into an airplane and propel it towards the prosecutor, who would not be impressed.

"In your confession to detective's Manning and Manahan you claimed to be able to talk with plants? Would you care to tell the court the sentiment behind that outrageous statement? Did you often have conversations with the potted plants in your apartment?"

"Not just my potted plants. All plant life. I can also talk to trees, and I can communicate with animals as well."

There was a certain amount of snickering throughout the courtroom.

"Well, that's quite remarkable, Miss Babcock. When did this ability first manifest itself? Was it before or after your first cold-blooded murder?"

"Objection, your Honor."

"Overruled, Mr. Layer. The defendant has already admitted to the murders."

"I was twelve years old. I was living with Mrs. Manford. I had a pet frog named Freddy and whenever he croaked I knew what he was saying. I could also communicate Cleopatra my cow and Henrietta my horse. I can also remember that later when I was a teenager a boy gave me a carnation and I cried, because I could hear it dying. My first corsage was just as painful, for the orchid spoke to me. Flowers are alive, so what gives us the right to kill them for no reason. Plants feel pain. That is why I killed the florist."

"Miss Babcock that is the most absurd thing you have said, and so far you have made several absurd statements."

"You have a Chinese jade plant in your office."

"Yes, you were in my office the other day."

"That's right, and I know for a fact that you and the court stenographer sitting over there have sex in your office on a regular basis."

The prosecutor's face turned red and his eyes met for a brief moment with the stenographer as she typed in her own tete- a-tete. "How, how could you possibly know that?" he stammered.

"The plant in your office told me. He was quite put off. Apparently you do it right in front of him on your desk."

There was a burst of laughter in the courtroom, which gave Ozone an idea. He asked the judge for a thirty minute recess. Then in the outer hall he had an argument with the prosecutor. I am going to prove that she can talk to plants," Ozone said, and then together they carried their argument into the judge's chambers.

When court was in session once more and everyone was seated very much as they were before, the prosecutor pulled two plants out of a shopping bag and he entered them as exhibit A and B. Only moments ago in his office the two plants in question had been subjected to separate

types of torture. The jade plant had been poisoned with ink by the prosecutor against the objects of Ozone Layer. "My client won't like what you're doing."

"If you insist on doing this then we do it my way," said the prosecutor who got some perverse pleasure in pouring the bottle of black ink into the "Judas" Jade.

"I don't know why he insisted on poisoning the plant?" Ozone Layer would later say. "He didn't believe the Babcock woman's story. He was sure that someone must have snitched about him and the stenographer."

"The stenographer herself?" the prosecutor himself suggested.

The other plant entered into exhibit was a small desert cactus, which the prosecutor spoke to, even though he felt silly doing so. He read to it a list of names, the names of the men that Mona murdered.

The judge jumped in. "Are you trying to convince this court that the defendant can indeed talk to plants? And even if she can communicate with creatures like she claims, what relation does it have on her case?"

Ozone Layer rose to his feet. "With your Honors kind permission while the prosecutor attempts to prove that my client is lying or disillusioned, he is about to unwittingly prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that the defendant can indeed communicate with a large number of creatures. She is turned into the workings of Mother Nature the way none of us are, and therefore the murders that she committed were something she was driven to do by not only her conscience, but by the conscience of every living organism. She was not responsible for her acts of violence. She saw no wrong in her vigilante behavior. She believed her actions to be altruistic."

"All right, but after this no more melodramatics. This is a murder case, not a magic show."

The prosecutor went over to the witness box where Mona was willfully waiting. He had agreed to the demonstration only because he did not believe, not for a moment, that Mona was capable of anything but killing in cold blood. "All right, Miss Babcock, what can you tell the court?"

She reached out with her right hand. Instantly, and instinctively, she struck the side of the prosecutors pockmarked face. Her finger nails, which were long and fierce, sliced into the side of his chubby cheek. There was a hush of surprise throughout the courtroom followed by confusion. The bailiff stepped forward and was ready to restrain Mona if necessary. "That's for poisoning the plant. Because of your total disregard for it's life it is going to die."

Judge Mansfield slammed his gavel to gain order in the court. "The defendant will control her temper and will apologize to the prosecutor, or I will hold her in contempt of court, again. No more outbursts, Miss Babcock, do you understand?"

"Go fuck yourself," she said.

Ozone interrupted right away before the judge had a chance to lay another contempt of court charge against his client. "Mona, tell the court whatever the other plant told you."

"Apparently, the prosecutor read it a list of names of the men that I murdered. It also tells me that the prosecutor has bad breath."

Everyone in the courtroom laughed. Everyone but the prosecutor, who quietly swore to himself, and the judge, who slammed his gavel several times. Even the stenographer smiled, for she could recall the stench of his bad breath on more than one occasion, as has already been entered into evidence.

"I have no more questions for the defendant at this time, your Honor," the prosecutor said.

He sat down dejected and then he whispered something about a surprise witness to his colleague who had just come from the district attorney's office.

Ozone strutted triumphantly over to the witness box. "Now you can also talk to trees?"

Mona nodded her head. "Yes."

"And what do the trees tell you?" he casually and kindly asked his client.

"They tell me many things. They tell me they're dying. They tell me the earth is in grave danger of being destroyed. They tell me the pollution on the planet will reach preposterous proportions if mankind does not do something soon. They tell me it may already be too late."

"Too late for what?"

"Life, Mr. Layer. Life. The decimation of the rain forests alone is frightening every species on the planet with the exception of man, who is aware of his wrongdoing and the danger, but he does not stop."

"Miss Babcock, you are a vegetarian, correct?"

"That's right, I don't eat meat. I don't believe it's necessary to kill any creature."

"Is that why you butchered the poor helpless pig farmer, and the fisherman, and..." the prosecutor shouted out of turn from where he was sitting until the judge ordered him to be silent.

"What about the poor helpless pigs and the frightened fish?" Mona shouted right back. "Why don't you prosecute people who eat pork?"

"Because, Miss Babcock, killing a pig is not against the law, but killing a man most certainly is," the prosecutor, once again out of turn, said, and then he sat back down defiantly.

"THOU SHALT NOT KILL," Mona screamed. "Mankind is a mass murderer of millions of creatures. We murder forests, and rivers, and lakes, and oceans, and all the animals that live in them. We destroy the atmosphere with our cars and our factories and our air conditioners, and this crummy court is concerned that I killed nine pathetic people who were themselves all murderers."

"But, Miss Babcock, it is against the law to kill your fellow man?" Ozone calmly pointed out.

"Says who? MAN?" Mona asked loudly. "It should be against the law to kill anything. What makes man the almighty? I'll tell you what makes man the almighty. Man makes man the almighty."

"Then it is your belief that it should not be against the law to kill your fellow man?" the judge himself asked, because he was confused and he thought that the jury might be as well.

"You're not listening," she said, and because he wasn't and the world wasn't she screamed again. "UNLESS IT IS ABSOLUTELY NECESSARY FOR THE SURVIVAL OF A SPECIES IT SHOULD BE AGAIN THE LAW TO KILL ANYTHING THAT IS ALIVE."

"Miss Babcock, you're a vegetarian, yet you say that plants feel pain? Could you explain to the court then how you justify eating something yourself that is alive?" Ozone asked her.

"It's necessary for my survival to eat something and since I can choose between high protein beans and a cow I take the lesser of the two evils. Furthermore, I sometimes apologize to the vegetables first. And you would too if you had ever heard a cucumber cry. If you were alert enough you too could hear the scared scream of a tomato when it's plucked from its vine. Do any of you know that a potato will plead for mercy prior to being pulled out of the ground?" she asked this question with a serious tone of voice and with an air of authority.

Ozone Layer said that at this time he had no more questions, and as soon as he sat down the prosecutor rose to his feet to cross-examine Mona. "According to you, Miss Babcock, society

should eat nothing but vegetables and we should apologize to them first. Perhaps we should say a prayer for the fact that they're sacrificing their little vegetable lives? Rather silly, wouldn't you say?"

"I'm simply saying society had better become much more sensitive to earth and to all her inhabitants," Mona said, and while she had the chance and was on the subject she went on to explain some of the suffering that goes on in a slaughterhouse. The cruelty of factory farming. How many minks it takes to make a coat. Waywardly she went on for a while about the whales and the senseless slaughtering of several other species and the prosecutor let her babble on for he believed that indubitably she was digging her own grave. Dolphins dying in fish nets infuriated her. Manatee being killed by speed boats on the Florida coast. "If the consumer had to kill the cow, how many of you sitting in this courtroom would still eat beef? How many people would go out into their suburban backyard and butcher a brown eyed baby cow by themselves? Would their mouths still water I wonder for a veal cutlet? Could you slit a calves throat, Mr. Prosecutor? Could you skin him, carve a steak out of his side, and then eat him with his blood still on your hands?" She looked menacingly at the members of the jury. "And how many of you could chop off a chickens head? I doubt, by he looks of you, that any of you could, but you can sink your teeth into a tender sirloin, a rump roast, a lamb's leg, a chicken's wing, and you don't suffer any moral misgivings. This court accuses me of murder and I am a murderer, but so are each and everyone of you. Why can't this court, this country, this crazy hypocrite filled world, see the consequences of killing innocent creatures? Be it man or mouse in my eyes murder is murder," she said and then her eyes met with the prosecutors. "I don't feel anymore sympathy for a child that has been killed in vain than I do for a baby kangaroo that has been killed for it's coat. And if you do? You are saying human beings are better than kangaroos which in my mind Mr. makes you a arrogant bigot, and more to the point, a murderer. And just because you don't kill the cow or the kangaroo or the mink with your own bare hands does not mean you are not an accomplice to the crime. If you eat a hamburger you are to blame for the death of a cow. If you wear a fox fur it's your fault the fox died. If you drive a car and create carbon dioxide you are a killer. Running an air conditioner, living off the land in the lap of luxury, makes us all mass murderers."

"I would like to object," Ozone Layer jumped up and yelled.

"To what?" the judge asked bewildered.

"To air conditioners, to aerosol spray cans, to Styrofoam, to refrigerators, and to all things that create chlorofluorocarbons," he cried.

"Overruled, and sit down Mr. Layer, before I hold you in contempt of court."

"Miss Babcock, do you kill house-flies?" the prosecutor asked pompously, for he just presumed that she did.

"Never," Mona proudly replied.

"Do you kill mosquitoes?"

"Never."

"Not even when they're biting you?"

"I brush them off."

"Do you, or have you, ever killed a cockroach?" he cleverly inquired, for he remembered that Mona had mentioned the room she rented in Hollywood had been crawling with them.

"Yes," Mona said, and her voice was full of shame.

"Ha, ha," said the prosecutor throwing his arms up in the air. He had proven his point.

"I can explain. It was in California. A couple of days after I killed them another cockroach came back in the middle of the night. He woke me up. He was talking to me. I turned on the light and he didn't scurry away like they usually do. He stayed on the counter and accused me of killing his clan. He was extremely annoyed, and if he had been big enough he probably would have made a meal out of me. I told him that I was sorry and that I wouldn't put out anymore poisonous powder. He told me that he wouldn't bother me as long as I didn't leave food lying around. But shortly after that enlightening experience I began deliberately leaving crumbs on the counter and Mr. Cockroach, as I called him, came regularly. Prior to this I had never been able to communicate with insects. We had many conversations, however, and you know it's been said that after a nuclear war the cockroaches might very well be the only survivors. If you get to know them they're really incredible creatures," she informed the court.

"That was very enlightening, Miss Babcock. Now would you tell the court if you've ever had crabs?"

"Why?"

"Just answer the question."

"Of course. I was a prostitute. They're almost impossible to avoid."

"And do you still have them?"

"No, of course not," Mona confessed in confusion.

"Then we can assume that you killed them? You did not keep the little critters on your person and turn them into pets? You did not pick the parasites off one by one and set them free?"

"No, you're being ridiculous."

"Then you admit to the court that you too kill God's little creatures. You too are a killer."

"Your Honor, I object. The prosecutor is badgering the witness."

"Overruled."

"Miss Babcock, do you hate human beings?"

"I think you're missing the point. Society..." she started to say.

"Just answer the question, yes or no? And might I remind you once again that you are on trial and not society, so your recriminating observations are not going to help your case. Now, answer the question. Do you hate human beings?"

"I hate the way we live..."

"Answer the question."

"I hate civilization, because it is not civilized..."

"Answer the question, Miss Babcock."

"YES," she said, and she said it with a vengeance. "PEOPLE PREY ON THE PLANET LIKE PARASITES, AND IF I WAS MOTHER NATURE I WOULD TAKE A GIANT BOTTLE OF LINDANE LOTION AND I WOULD EXTERMINATE EACH AND EVERY ONE OF US LIKE A BAD CASE OF CRABS."

The prosecutor pointed at Mona, while he looked at the jury and said, "Ladies and gentlemen, a violent vegetarian." He turned to Mona. "It must be hard to hate your own species."

Mona knew Manderson "the moron" was mocking her. After being on trial for the past two weeks she could easily tell when "the talking turd" was trying to make fun of her. "Yes, I admit it would be much easier to hate humans if I were a bird, or a tree, or a turtle, or a dog, or a cat, or even an alien."

"When was the first time you entertained the thought of killing someone?"

"Two years ago. I had just returned to Raven Rock from Los Angeles and I was in the process of selling my parents farmland."

"Tell us about it, Miss Babcock."

"Well, while I was waiting for the money to buy the store I rented a little cottage by the ocean. I needed to recuperate after my life in L.A. Anyway, as you know there are high cliffs and a rocky shoreline all along the coast, and Raven Rock is a regular resting place for the ravens. Suffice to say the surplus of those big black birds is how the town originally got its name. For several months every year you can see them roosting on the rocks. There were hundreds of them. Some were resident birds that built their nests on the ledges along the cliffs, while others migrated from the mountains for the winter months. At the time I was becoming more and more aware of the pollution caused by the pulp and paper mill. I had learned the Care Less Chemical Company was spilling toxic waste into the water. Garbage was being dumped directly and indiscriminately into the river by the residents of Raven Rock. I started reading about acid rain killing forests and fish. Murdering those men was my way of putting an end to pollution."

"Yes, but when was the first time you actually thought of taking a human life?"

"It was my last week at the cottage when I found a young raven. His wing was broken and he was bleeding. Of course I was able to communicate with him and he told me two teenagers had shot him just because he was an easy target sitting in a tree. That was the first time I truly realized how incredibly cruel humans can be. I took the raven to the cottage and nursed him back to health. His wing healed, he regained his strength, and when he was able to fly once again I carried him back to the cliffs where he told me he had a family waiting for him. He also told me that mankind was taking a perilous plunge into darkness and oblivion, and because of our selfishness and stupidity as a species, we were taking every other innocent creature along for the ride. That's when I fully realized the extent of mankind's arrogance and his total disregard for his fellow inhabitants. You might say I saw man in a new light and it was very unbecoming. I saw him as an enemy to every species on the planet, including himself. 'He's a very self-destructive animal,' the raven told me. And that's when I decided to take matters into my own hands by way of murder. I remember standing on the edge of the cliff watching the big black bird fly away with the wind and saying to myself. 'As God as my witness I will put an end to pollution single handedly if I have to lie, cheat, steal, or... kill.'"

"What do you think the raven meant when he told you mankind was taking a perilous plunge into darkness and oblivion?" asked the prosecutor.

"He flew away before I had a chance to ask him, but just before that comment he had been talking about pollution and about nuclear war, so he could have been referring to either."

"No more questions, your Honor."

"Call your next witness," judge Mansfield ordered.

"Your Honor, the State would like to call Feral F. Forrester to the stand."

Feral was not in the courtroom when his name was called. The bailiff found him waiting in the hallway. He was in a cold sweat and he had received the subpoena from the district attorney's office. Jane had offered to come with him, but he told her it was out of the question. "There will be reporters at the trial, and the press is already calling you the other woman. Let me go testify. I'll tell them whatever they want to know, and then I'll bring my son back with me."

"Frenzy? What a funny name?" Jane had said. Then she helped her husband pack and she gave him one of her sleeping pills to take on the plane, for Feral had a fear of flying.

Mona had taken her appointed place next to Ozone Layer and although she was handcuffed and was wearing leg irons she turned around abruptly upon hearing the courtroom doors swing open. It wasn't necessary though, for she could sense he was in the room before she ever saw him. "Did you know about this?" she snapped at Ozone.

Ozone's smile was not too convincing, but then it wasn't meant to be. It was, however, sympathetic and sincere. He just held her hand, hoped for the best and prepared for the worst.

It had been a little over five years since Mona and Feral had seen each other and Mona could see that in that time he had changed very little. She, on the other hand, was sure that life had left more of a mark on her. She watched him as he waltzed up to the witness box wearing a suit and a tie; and immediately her entire manner changed. Even the judge and the members of the jury noticed the dramatic difference. She was no longer "the sorceress" sitting on the edge of her seat ready to scream, swear, or shout something sarcastic and obscene. They didn't know for sure that it was Feral who was affecting her so, but Ozone Layer did, and he was sitting close enough to her to see that when her usual disdainful expression disappeared it was replaced by a look of total despair.

"Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God?"

"I do," Feral replied.

"WHY DIDN'T YOU SAY THOSE WORDS ON THE DAY OF OUR WEDDING?" Mona shouted.

"Be seated, and state your full name."

"Feral F. Forrester."

The prosecutor approached. "When was the last time you saw the defendant, Mona Babcock?"

"Five years ago," Feral replied without looking in the direction of the defendant.

Mona's senses told her she would not survive the humiliation she felt. She could not look at Feral for long. There were moments when she could not bring herself to look his way at all. It hurt. O man, how it hurts to see him, she thought to herself. And once when it was necessary for her to gaze in his direction, to do otherwise would be a sure sign of weakness on her part, their eyes met, for Feral was also looking at her for the first time. It could be said that Mona melted as fast as a snowball in the Sahara desert. Had her daydream finally come true? she wondered. Indeed, she had fallen into the shark infested waters. In fact, right now, the way she saw it, she was surrounded by a species far more sinister than sharks. Had Feral come to save her from her most unfortunate fate? Was he going to disappoint the prosecutor by testifying on her behalf? Or was he just one more witness for the prosecution that was hell bent on putting her behind bars for the rest of her life?

"Yes, that's right, she claimed she could talk to plants. Yes, she wrote me a letter a few months ago telling me I had a son. I believe it was right before she was arrested. Yes, that's right, I told my wife about the affair we had five years ago. Sure, she was shocked at the time, but she forgave me. She was more shocked when I called her last night and told her about the baby. Yes, I found out yesterday that my son is a fetus floating in a jar full of formaldehyde. I was not only surprised, I was sickened. Well, you see, Jane can't have children and she was looking forward to my bringing Frenzy home. She doesn't believe in abortion. She says the minute the ova and the sperm meet it's a life. Therefore, Frenzy, was fertilized and alive, and that bitch murdered him." He pointed directly at Mona, who quite easily came to the conclusion that Feral had not come to rescue her from under the microscope that society was using in

scrutiny of her sanity. He had not come to throw her a line. Feral F. Forrester had come to feed her to the sharks on a silver platter.

"Yes, I left her at the altar. Did I love her? I did when we were together, but..."

"No, I did not know the defendant was a prostitute. She claimed she was a virgin five years ago..."

"I WAS A VIRGIN UNTIL YOU PUT IT INTO ME WITH A PROMISE OF MARRIAGE."

"No, I knew absolutely nothing at all about the murders until I read in the paper that she had been arrested. I suppose it all began after we broke up..."

"WE DIDN'T BREAK UP, YOU BALLESS BASTARD. YOU LEFT ME AT THE ALTAR. ARREST THE PRICK FOR PERJURY."

"Mr. Layer, control your client."

"FUCK YOU, AND ALL OF YOUR ANCESTORS AND ALL OF YOUR OFFSPRING, FERAL FUCKING FORRESTER."

"Miss Babcock, sit down and be quiet. This is a court of law. In light of your unusual disposition I have allowed you some leeway. Now, you either contain yourself or I will bar you from the courtroom and your trial will continue without you."

In the days that followed Mona was forced to watch one witness after another come forward to testify against her. She not so silently watched as articles from the crime lab were placed into exhibit. The coroner who performed the autopsies on most of her victims testified as did detectives Mary Manahan and Richard Manning. At the moment Mona was in the midst of defending herself from an onslaught of accusations. The jury was looking at her like she was a madwoman, as she ranted and raved about Manhattan, martyrs, minks, and murderers. Ozone Layer was delighted, because after two months of listening to Mona the jurors were bound to find her not guilty by reason of insanity.

"...and how many martyrs are there in Manhattan?" Mona asked the court.

"Not many," she answered herself in absolute anger.

"But how many mink coats are there in Manhattan?"

"TOO MANY," she yelled in outrage.

Once again judge Mansfield slammed his gavel to get the courts attention. "Order. Order."

"AND HOW MANY MURDERERS ARE THERE IN MANHATTAN?" Mona shrieked, and again she answered herself by raising her arms emphatically over her head and hollering, "ONE AND A HALF MILLION."

"Ladies and gentlemen of the jury allow me to paint you a picture. A portrait of a prostitute paralyzed by her beliefs and her passion for putting an end to pollution and to the cruelty of animals. A noble cause perhaps, but I say she knew what she was doing at the time of every murder. She herself said, 'Thou shalt not kill.' She has confessed to nine cold blooded homicides and it is up to you to find her guilty of murder in the first degree. Mona Babcock, the defendant belongs behind bars for the rest of her life. It is your duty as upstanding citizens to see that justice is served, to see that this mass murderess gets what she deserves."

After the prosecutor painstakingly finished painting his not too pretty picture it was Ozone's turn to tackle the twelve members of the jury with his summation. Standing before the six men and six women he spoke as eloquently as he could. "Miss Babcock, in all her inner beauty, can not see the difference between killing a cow or a human or an ant or a tomato. You heard her testimony. In her mind murder is murder, and I tend to agree with her. Is the life of a man more important than the life of a mouse? To another man, perhaps, but not to another mouse. And

after all is it not true that humankind is guilty of the horrendous acts against nature that my client accuses him of and many, many more. Mona Babcock does not belong behind bars. I say she should be given a medal for the murders that she committed and subsequently she should be set free."

"Will the defendant please rise?" judge Mansfield ordered.

"O man," Mona said, in reference to the creatures she saw before her in the crowded courtroom. "O man, the murderers," she bemoaned, for after only one hour of deliberation the verdict was in.

"It is the opinion of this jury that Mona Babcock, the defendant, is an extremely intelligent woman, but at the same time she is an extreme threat to society. She is ruthless, and as several psychiatrists have testified she seems to suffer from some form of schizophrenia or a severe psychotic disorder..."

Ozone Layer flew to his feet. "Your Honor, I object."

"Mr. Layer, for the last time, you can not object. The trial is over."

"I OBJECT TO THE FUCKING HOLE IN THE OZONE LAYER."

"OVERRULED."

The jury found her not guilty by reason of insanity on all nine counts of murder. After five years Feral still found her attractive, but as infuriating as ever. Ozone Layer found her fascinating and even friendly in an environmental mode; while the patients and the staff at the "funny farm" found her frightening.

Mona was twenty five years old when she was sent to a State Mental Institution in the misty mountains of Montana miles away from Raven Rock. Strapped into a straight jacket and pushed into a paddy wagon by the police she screamed, "INSECTS. YOU INSECTS ARE SENDING ME TO A MADHOUSE. YOU ARE THE MURDERERS. YOU ARE THE MADMEN." And her laughter complimented her lunatic behavior, for it was not only loud it was high pitched and unappealing; and as the paddy wagon approached the asylum for the criminally insane her cackling increased.

Raven is secretly writing in his study, and because of the surreptitious nature in which he is forced to work on the novel, he is sure that more spice will be added to the story. Very few of his friends know about his disobedient behavior, but everyone of them know about "the banning of the book." He is hoping, however unlikely, that when he finishes the novel Mother Nature will be pleased enough with the final product to forget that she banned it to begin with.

Rebecca, after turning her somewhat short attention span from the soap opera, she watches without fail every afternoon, to the chapter which Raven gave her to read the night before, says, "Well, are you going to leave her there?"

"Who?" Raven asks.

"Mona. Are you going to leave her in the madhouse?"

"I don't know," he replies. "When did you finish?"

"This morning, while you were at the library."

Early every morning Raven rides on an air current to the library in Raven Rock. And his

reason for going? Research. "I'm looking for a book on how to build a bomb. A big bomb. A bomb big enough to blow up the entire world."

The bewildered librarian looks at the big black bird in disbelief, and before searching on her computer for a book on the said subject, she says, "Are you sure?"

"Am I sure about what?"

"It's just that birds don't read books," she replies.

Raven is tempted to tell the bigoted human being that not only does he read, he writes, and he can type between sixty and seventy words per minute, yet he doesn't, for he is afraid that somewhere Mother Nature might be eavesdropping. In fact, he notices that right now there is a fly buzzing around the room, which might very well be...

"Here's your book," says the librarian upon her return. "I found it in the reference department. You may sit over there." She points towards a corner of the crowded room which Raven crosses reluctantly.

"It's a bird," says a student studying geometry for an upcoming school exam.

"Look at his beak," whispers another one.

The spot where she has sent him to sit is a poorly lit place, but even so he is beside himself, since he is surrounded by so many shelves of books. The book he reads is called *The Building of the Bomb*. When he is done reading it he decides to read another book by Jonathan Schell. It is called *The Fate of the Earth*. Raven is dismayed to learn that many of his fears about the state of the world are reinforced in grandiose detail, for in it he reads: "Fission and fusion can occur in a great many forms. A typical hydrogen bomb is a four stage device. In the first stage, a conventional explosion is set off, in the second stage, the conventional explosion initiates a fission reaction, which is, in fact, an atomic bomb, in the third stage, the heat from the atomic bomb initiates a fusion reaction; and in the fourth stage neutrons from the fusion reaction initiate additional fission. The trigger consists of a carefully fashioned subcritical, spherical piece of plutonium, with a neutron-initiator device in its interior and a high-explosive jacket surrounding it. Things begin to happen when detonators all over the sphere of the high-explosive jacket go off - as nearly simultaneously as the design permits. Now the high-explosive jacket explodes and sends a shock wave traveling inward in a shrinking concentric sphere, and gaining force and temperature as it proceeds. When its leading edge reaches the plutonium core, there is an abrupt jump in pressure, which squeezes the plutonium in on all sides with great precision. The pressure makes the plutonium go from subcritical to supercritical. At this point, the neutron initiator fires, and the chain reaction begins. The trick is to compress the plutonium as much as possible as quickly as possible because then more generations of nuclei will be fissioned, and more energy will be released, before the explosion, in effect, blows itself out. When that happens, all the energy from the plutonium trigger will have been released, and particles whose atomic identity has been lost will be boiling and surging in an expanded sphere whose temperature exceeds stellar levels. In all the universe, temperatures of equal heat are to be found only in such transient phenomena as exploding supernova. Now the fusion - otherwise known as the thermonuclear reaction, because of the extreme heat needed to initiate it, can begin. The fusion fuels fly around with such velocity that they can simply coast right into one another, spitting out nuclear particles as they fuse. By the time that happens, however, the last stage - the fissioning is under way. There is basically no limit to the size or yield of a thermonuclear weapon. The only limits on a bomb's destructive effect are the earth's capacity to absorb the blast!"

Raven is nauseous from fear after he finishes reading the book. He looks for the librarian and he finds her having a finger fight with her computer keyboard. "Now," he says to the back of her head, "I need to know how many bombs the United States of America has at her disposal?"

After she finishes cursing her computer back to the stone age she turns around in a turmoil. "You again. I thought you had gone hours ago?"

"I also need to know how many bombs the Soviets have in each other their republics? I believe that China, France, Great Britain, possibly South America, and Israel, all have nuclear weapons, but I have to know for sure. And, do any other countries possess nuclear bombs?"

He starts with a set of encyclopedias, but they are of no help and he soon realizes the answer to the burning question of "how many countries have the bomb?" will not be found in any book, so when a warning comes over the loud speaker that tells him the library is closing in fifteen minutes he gather his belongings and leaves. He flies directly home, but by the time he gets back to Raven Manor it is almost midnight. He is very quiet when he enters the house. The lights are off in every room. He toddles up the stairs on the tips of his talons. Rebecca is in bed, but she is not sleeping. She is reading one of Raven's old issues of The New Yorker magazine.

"How did your research go today?" she asks.

"Very well, my dear. How was your day?"

"I was busy all morning with Mrs. Bee, and then this afternoon I went shopping for a new pair of shoes with Ruth."

"My dear, did you know there are over fifty thousand nuclear warheads in the world?" he asks her, as he undresses.

"No, I didn't," she replies and she is petrified. She watches Raven as he puts on his pajamas.

"It's true. The equivalent of twenty billion tons of TNT," he tells her, though it is not his intent to terrify her and at the moment he is unaware of his having done so. He gets into bed and buries his beak in the fluffy feathers that cover her breast bone. Soon after they both fall asleep.

Soon, Raven realizes that keeping his writing a secret is going to be much more difficult than he thought when he was coming down Mount Saint Helens, for that was when he had first decided to directly disobey "the ban." Now, he has come to the conclusion that no one can be trusted. Any creature he comes in contact with can turn him in. A moth outside his window one night causes him to panic, because the moth might be a messenger sent by Mother Nature? And Mr. Spider, who every so often appears in Raven's room, also makes him paranoid and puts him into a panicked state. "I won't tattle about your typing," Mr. Spider says, as he hangs from a ceiling beam in his web watching Raven work. Then an ant crawls across the floor and Raven worries that he will spread the word.

Rabbit and Ruth figure it out for themselves that Raven is still writing. "It doesn't take a genius to know that Raven didn't give it up," they tell Rebecca. "We knew he wouldn't stop, but don't worry we won't breathe a word."

Bachelor Buck and Mr. Bear are another pair of animals who have inadvertently gained access to this privileged information. They hear the tapping of the typewriter from the front yard one afternoon when they drop by unexpectedly for a visit.

Mr. Wolf is no wiser, and Raven wishes for it to remain that way. "Bachelor Buck and Mr. Bear you must promise me that you won't tell Mr. Wolf. It's not that I don't trust him, but the more animals that know the more chance Mother Nature has of finding out."

"Why of course," they chime. "He won't find out from either of us. We wouldn't dream of mentioning it."

Mr. Whale is more knowledgeable than the rest in regards to Raven's writing. Except for Rebecca he is the only one allowed to read it as Raven writes it; and of course, Sea Gull knows. "He's been in on the book since the beginning. I can trust him with my life," he tells Rebecca.

But, what if Mother Nature disguises herself? Not as a fly on the wall or as a spider spinning a web or as an ant, but as one of Raven's friends? What if she poses as Mr. Porpoise, or Mr. Whale, or Mr. Raccoon? What if she makes herself look like Mr. Bear, or Bachelor Buck, or Ruth, or Rabbit, or Sea Gull? Or, a far worse scenario enters his mind, what if...? "Oh no, what if she changes herself into a bird that looks like Rebecca?" Raven says while he is alone in his study. "Oh, why didn't I think of it before? I should have given Rebecca a code word, so that at all times I would know that it is actually her." He turns his typewriter off and he rushes down the stairs. Rebecca, he knows, is not at home. The perfect opportunity for Mother Nature to appear with a body and a face just like Rebecca's. Where did Rebecca say she was going this morning? Shopping with Ruth? Or were they both going to Miss Beaver's beauty parlor? Raven can't remember. He hurries back up the stairs. In his study he hides all the chapters he's finished so far and he stuffs his typewriter under the couch in the corner of the room. "I'm safe, for the time being," he sighs on his way back downstairs, where he waits impatiently for Rebecca to return. If indeed it is Rebecca that returns? "It would be just like Mother Nature to metamorphosize herself, pretend she's my spouse, and then reveal her true identity during dinner while I'm babbling on about the book." And no sooner does Raven say this to himself when he hears someone at the front door. He flies off the chair he is sitting on to confront whomever it might be?

"Hello dear, how was your day?"

"Tiresome," Rebecca, or a perfect replica of her, replies. "How was your day? Did you get a lot of writing done?"

"Writing? What are you talking about? Silly bird. I'm not writing a book. Mother Nature told me not to, remember. So, have you been shopping?"

"No," Rebecca or a very good lookalike replies.

"Have you been to the beauty parlor? You look lovely."

"Well thank you, Raven, but I wasn't at the beauty parlor."

He studies her closely. Her features look the same. Her feathers look the same. The twinkle in her black eyes is no different, but he is not convinced. He can not be too careful. There is too much at stake. "Where were you all afternoon?"

"I told you this morning that Ruth and I were throwing a baby shower for Mrs. Opossum. Are you feeling all right. Why are you staring at me like that? Do I have something on my beak?"

"I was just wondering if you remember our wedding night?"

"What?"

"Our wedding night? Where did we go?" Raven asks with his voice raised.

"What on earth is the matter with you? You were there, so surely you remember? And if you don't..."

"I remember, but I want you to tell me where we went?"

"We flew to Niagara Falls, you fool. Now tell me what all this nonsense is about. I have to make dinner."

Mother Nature could know that, Raven thinks to himself. She knows everything, for like God she is everywhere. He moves even closer to his wife, or to the imposter, whichever the case

might be, and he studies her carefully. He flaps his wings ferociously and flies away from what he now believes to be a poor replica of Rebecca. "Tell me who you are," he demands from across the room. "I can see right through your disguise. You are not my wife. I know who you are. Your tricky transformations do not fool me, you fake. You are Mother Nature. Show yourself," she shouts.

"Raven, have you lost your mind?" Rebecca retorts. "Have you gone off your rocker, Raven? It's I, Rebecca."

"Then what happened to your big black bushy eyebrows?"

"I decided to pluck them approximately two weeks ago. Sally suggested it, which proves you pay more attention to your book than you do to me."

"Oh really, well what else happened on our honeymoon?"

"Nothing happened you got drunk on a bottle of champagne and passed out."

Raven is not completely convinced, but he can not take the chance of questioning Rebecca anymore. She is already upset and he does not particularly wish to provoke her into a pecking match.

"Raven, get some rest before dinner. You've been working too hard on that damn book. And stop worrying about Mother Nature. I know what you're up to. You think that I am her, well I'm not. If you're going to write the book, then write it, and stop fretting over the future. If the day ever comes when you have to face her, you'll do so like the magnificent bird that you are with me by your side, but until then, for your sake and mine, pretend you're a human being if you have to. They have a way of putting Mother Nature out of their minds."

The next day Raven is on his way to the library when he realizes that Rebecca is right, so decidedly from now on he will no longer concern himself with Mother Nature's banning of the book. Instead, he will put all of his energy into writing the book. He is almost finished all the research he needs to do for the sake of authenticity. He knows everything he needs to know about nuclear bombs, which apparently have become the terrifying premise of the book.

He is sitting in the library for the last time when he gets (what he considers to be) a brilliant idea for a new character. After reciting off at random an assortment of names Raven resigns himself by waiting for inspiration to strike. He is knowledgeable enough about the creative process to know that waiting for inspiration is never the best route to take in writing, but today it would seem that he is rewarded for all of his previous hard labor. He is staring at the row of books directly in front of him. It is the biography section that he is looking at and one name stands out, like a sore thumb, above the rest. Inspiration does strike, it hammers him over the head in fact, for the book is a biography about Adolf Hitler leader of the Third Reich. He is unable to wait until he returns to his study at Raven Manor. He picks up his pen. He opens his notebook and in it he writes: The Hitler's lived on top of a landfill in New Mexico, and not far enough away from a nuclear test sight. They lived there all of their lives. "They are lucky," some say, "to have lived at all."

"Our well water was contaminated, but we drank it because at the time we didn't know," Mrs. Hitler testified at the trial. "The vegetables that grew in our garden, the artichoke, the tomatoes, the potatoes, the carrots, and the corn were all contaminated with high levels of lead. The soil," she also said, "was saturated with several dangerous chemicals the U.S. government decided to bury in the ground, but obviously not deep enough," she declared. "And radioactive dust in the desert killed one creature after another, and because their carcasses were contaminated even the vultures feeding on the carrion were killed."

Mrs. Hitler's husband died at an early age from an unknown disease just before his wife gave birth to a baby boy, who from the moment of birth had the most amazing cry. Everyone that heard the cry commented on the clarity of the high notes. "Higher, honey, higher," his mother would coax him, for she was delighted with the singing of her son the soprano. So were strangers on the street, for they would often stop and say, "My, what a beautiful ball your baby has."

"I swear he hits one octave after another."

"He cries on key," another claimed.

"He certainly can carry a tune."

"What's his name?"

"Adolf."

"How adorable, but aren't you Mrs. Hitler?"

"Yes."

"That means your baby's name is Adolf Hitler?"

Adolf may have been blessed with a beautiful voice, but this fortune was compensated for by the fact that he had no hair on his head. And his mother, who was slowly dying herself from an incurable cancer (chemical contamination was the confirmed cause) said to the Supreme Court: "My son is so crippled he looks like a monster in a movie. He has fourteen fingers. Seven on each hand, but let us be thankful for the four extra fingers, for he has no toes. On top of both of his legs being terribly twisted one leg is twelve inches shorter than the other. His face is so disfigured it is frightening even to me. His eyes are so big they bulge. He has no nose..."

"No nose?"

"That's right, no nose."

"How does he breathe?" the court asked.

"He has nostrils, and he has a mouth, a misshapen one. And his ears? His ears are fit for flying."

A dozen different doctors all said the same thing. "There's little that can be done for the deformities. It's a congenital birth defect, of some kind or another?"

"Why?" she asked them.

"We don't know why," they said, so one day Mrs. Hitler loudly asked the Lord. "WHY?" And later she would ask the U.S. government, "WHY?" and later still the Supreme Court.

"The only thing that seems to be fully functional on little Adolf is his brain," she testified. "He is by any standards brilliant, almost beyond belief. On his first birthday he knew the English, the Greek, and the Hebrew alphabet frontwards and backwards, and he was doing finger paintings that would have made Picasso proud. At two years of age he had not only read *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens, he had written an essay about the book. When he was three he was teaching himself calculus on his computer. When he turned four he learned to speak Latin and he demanded that I send him to school. By the age of eleven he had graduated from high school where he took up a keen interest in science, but he said that school was a waste of his valuable time and talent, so he turned down a university scholarship and started studying at home. By his fifteenth birthday he not only knew all about nuclear physics, the little bugger knew how to build a bomb."

"It's amazing what one can learn at your local library," young Adolf told his mother in the motel room, after she demanded to know how he was able to blow up their basement.

"And why is there such a high level of radioactivity in our house?" she inquired of him. Then

no sooner had she done so when she remembered all the books she had seen lying around their living room. "Adolf, I want you to tell me the truth, was it nuclear?"

"Well, yes, but it was the tiniest of bombs. Why, it wasn't even one millionth of a megaton, mother, and I didn't mean to detonate it."

"WHY?" she asked the Lord.

Adolf was twenty one when his mother painfully passed away. She had been ill for quite some time, but it was still a shock to her only son. "Promise me something? Promise me you won't build anymore bombs, and promise me that you'll use your brain power for the good of mankind," she said in the hospital just moments before she died.

"I promise," Adolf swore while holding his mother's hand.

He had inherited the majority of his mother's money and she was a wealthy woman. The Supreme Court had awarded her a sizable settlement. In the stock market Adolf quickly turned "a few measly million" into a vast fortune. His accountant told him that he had a killer instinct.

Hitler did indeed have a killer instinct; a sadistic side to his personality that had come into play with puberty, which in itself came relatively late in his life. One of his doctors at the time said he was surprised he could come at all. Another was convinced that Adolf Hitler would never be able to experience an orgasm. But, sure enough, looking at a Playboy centerfold, playing with his crooked little penis, eventually, he ejaculated.

"What happened to your beautiful voice?" his mother asked, for almost overnight Adolf had become a baritone thanks to the "big boobs" on that Playboy bunny.

He was not the least bit disappointed, however, about the loss of his soprano voice. He had never been at all interested in pursuing a singing career like Caruso. "I'm too ugly," he complained to his starry eyed mother. "People won't pay to see me perform unless I was in a carnival, but I don't want to be a freak in a side show," he added with tears in his eyes at the time to his mother, whom he now missed much more than he ever imagined possible.

It was shortly after he lost his voice when his sadistic side fully emerged. Prior to puberty he had always been found of killing insects and such, but after his first ejaculation this fondness turned into an obsession which consumed him. It did not matter to him what he killed it was the act of taking a life that gave him great pleasure. He found it thrilling to set field mice on fire, and whenever he could he liked to kill cats and dogs and rabbits and snakes and squirrels. He was forever pulling the wings off flies. He put firecrackers in frogs. He built a kind of concentration camp for insects. A cardboard box lined with glue that he filled with every live bug that he could find. There they would starve to death, or suffocate, or die of despair. Sometimes the fumes from the glue alone were enough to end their little lives. Mrs. Hitler, who noticed him stomping on grasshoppers and lady bugs with his good leg once when he was just a little boy thought nothing of it, but by the time he was sixteen she was well aware of what she called "his wicked ways," for he was chopping the heads off chipmunks, capturing birds and breaking their wings. "WHY?" she asked, like it was the only word she knew.

"Why not?" Adolf answered, and as he grew older his total disregard for the suffering of little animals turned into a hatred for all of humanity, because they were to blame for the brace he had to wear on his leg, for his four extra fingers, for his missing toes, for the twist in his good leg, for his disfigured face, for the death of his father, and finally for the death of his mother. It was at her funeral, in fact, when a series of iniquitous questions first popped into his prodigious mind. And now sometimes even in the middle of the night he would awake and he would ask himself several of those same questions. "How? How can I get my hideous hands on enough

plutonium? Where? Where will I find all the ingredients required to build a bomb? A big bomb. A bomb big enough to blow up the entire world!"

And many times he heard his mother's voice blowing in the desert wind asking, "WHY?"

"Why not?" Adolf always answered.

Raven drops his notebook into his carrying case and with tired red eyes he returns to Raven Manor. He is not at all sure what to do with the creepy character he has just created? And how can I make Adolf Hitler's building of the bomb believable? is a question that pops into Raven's, possibly, prodigious mind. Masterfully, he decides to move the man to Montana, not far from the madhouse where Mona, the mental patient, presently resides.

In the misty mountains of Montana, miles away from civilization, Adolf Hitler hides, building the biggest bomb in the history of mankind, Raven writes.

"Good grief," Rebecca says, after she reads and then rereads everything that Raven has just recently written.

"Too farfetched?" he asks her uneasily.

"No, it's far too possible," Rebecca is saddened to say.

"My feelings exactly," Raven replies.

"How big is the bomb going to be?" she asks.

"One million megatons, my dear. One million megatons."

"Wouldn't one megaton be enough to prove your point?"

"Maybe, but I want to scare some sense into my readers, and since the majority of them have been jaded by many other doomsday novels I must make mine more terrifying. An amageddon even more ghastly than the one described in the book of Revelations. An apocalypse of unimaginable proportions," Raven says to his wife, and then he puts the pages of Adolf Hitler into his desk drawer, for at the moment what matters most to Raven is returning to his main character, the mighty Mona Babcock. He wonders, as he turns on his typewriter, how Mona, the murderess, is managing in the madhouse?

THE MADHOUSE

"I CAN NOT STAND ONE MORE MINUTE OF MISERY," Mona shrieked. "MUCH LESS ANOTHER MOMENT IN THIS MADHOUSE, AND IF YOU MORONS THINK THAT I'M GOING TO LET YOU GIVE ME SHOCK TREATMENTS WITHOUT PUTTING UP A FIGHT, YOU'RE OUT OF YOUR FUCKING MINDS..."

Most of the time no one paid much attention to Mona's wailing. It seemed likely to her that no one ever would, so suffice to say, "My whole life has been one long line of losses. A tale of tragedy, beginning with the death of my parents..."

"Do you remember them?"

"I can remember my father calling me "his little muffin," but the only memory I have of my mother is in our kitchen the day of the accident. I remember her going out the back door and knowing somehow that she would never come back. I also remember Mrs. Manford yelling at me afterwards. She was mad..."

"Do you know why she was mad?"

"I MEAN SHE WAS MAD IN THE MIND," Mona shouted at the psychiatrist. "How should I know why she was mad? I was only two years old at the time, YOU WALKING TALKING TURD."

The psychiatrist was seemingly a sullen individual, but later when he was speaking with his associate about Mona he was in a rather righteous mood. He did not take kindly to being called a turd.

"She is a mass murderess who thinks of herself as a martyr for all of mankind. She is a dangerously deranged woman who believes her victims deserve to die," the psychiatrist stated.

"She certainly sounds like a madwoman," his associate said.

"She claims she can feel vibrations from the rain forests being cut down in Brazil."

"But, Brazil is in South America?"

"Yes, I know, that's my point. She says, and I quote, 'The cutting down of the trees and the burning of the forests is sometimes so deafening it awakens me in the middle of the night. It's driving me insane.' She says their sorrow makes her sick to her stomach. She also says the hole in the ozone layer is growing larger by the minute, because of all the CFC's mankind is releasing into the atmosphere. She's afraid that one day the ozone layer will disappear altogether and the earth will burn up. So, she's developed an irrational fear of sitting in the sun."

"But, isn't that quite possible?"

"Of course it is," said the psychiatrist, "but she has taken it to the extreme." He stood up and he called his associate over to his office window. "Look out there in the yard. See the woman standing by the fence? The one wearing the hat and the dark sunglasses."

"Is that her?"

"Yes, now notice the sky."

"It's cloudy."

"Precisely my point," he said, and then he continued to crucify Mona with his psychiatric report. He said she was schizophrenic, quite possibly psychotic, and he called her an incurable case. His name was Stuart Fleshman, but Mona constantly called him Sigmund Fraud. 'Yes, Sigmund Fraud. No, Sigmund Fraud. Whatever you say, Sigmund Fraud, you're the shrink. FUCK OFF, YOU FRAUD.'

Dr. Fleshman picked the patient's folder up off his desk and in doing so he could readily feel how fat it was. He could see how fat it was. "When you commit nine murders you end up having a fat folder, and that's all there is to it," Dr. Fleshman commented and it's funny the way his mind worked.

"In your professional opinion, Dr. Fleshman, is the patient insane?"

"After an extensive evaluation of the patient it is my opinion that there are many things affecting Mona Babcock's mental health. She is malevolent beyond to reason towards members of the opposite sex. She resents her parents death. She blames fate for making her fall in love with..." he had to stop and check the folder, "Feral F. Forrester. A man whom she is obsessed about. She suffers from a manic depressive disorder, and most importantly, she is convinced she can communicate with plants and animals which is a sure sign of schizophrenia."

"Can she be cured?"

The psychiatrist shook his head. "It's doubtful."

"Have you considered shock therapy?"

"Yes, but first we'll see how she responds to the antipsychotic drugs I've prescribed. If they

work and if she starts to cooperate shock treatments may not be necessary."

"What does the warden want to do with her?"

"You know him. He doesn't care what we do as long as he's left alone. He told me to keep her tranquilized."

The first thing that enraged Mona about the madhouse were the meals. "MEAT," she raved, right after her already disruptive arrival. It was, in fact, her first day there when they had tried to serve her "roasted cow," as she had called it, and she had threatened to kill the cook, everyone in the kitchen, and the person who killed the cow, but of course she was strapped into a straight jacket at the time and confined to her room.

Her second day there was no different. "They're french fried potatoes," the orderly who had delivered her meal on a tray said.

"Yes, but they're fried in fat, not in vegetable oil," Mona complained. "Take them away. I can't eat them."

"Well, eat your soup. It's Habitant pea, surely it won't kill you?"

Mona thought the pea soup sounded safe, so she swallowed one spoonful before realizing the mistake she'd made. "There's ham in the broth, YOU BITCH. You people are trying to poison me." She tossed the tray across the room, rinsed her mouth with water, and went hungry.

Her room, with its stark white walls, was eight feet by ten feet. There was a radio built into a wall, so every night lying on her bed she would listen to the news like it was Novocain, or a much needed knock over the head, for it was her only contact with the outside world. Her bed, with its musty smelling mattress, was built into a wall as well. A fluorescent light in the ceiling came on at six am every morning and it was turned off automatically at ten pm every evening. There were steel bars on the only window the room had to offer, but there were hinges and a latch on the frame that allowed her to swing the window open whenever she wished for fresh air. The steel bars, obviously, were securely set in cement, while the window itself was made from an unbreakable opaque plastic. With the window open, however, she had a terrific view of a mountain top only one or two miles away. She was on the third floor of the monstrous stone building where the patients considered the most dangerous were kept, and kept they were under lock and key and the close supervision of a video camera. There were cameras in every room. "Yeah, but you can tell when they're watching ya cause the red light comes on," one of the other murderers in the madhouse told Mona, who only moments ago had been taken into the TV room by an orderly and left there.

"Ah, after ya've been here for a vwhile they vwon't vwatch ya, unless ya's suicidal?" Martha, the murderess, said to Mona, the murderess.

"I'm not," Mona said, "so shut up!"

The television was watched each night after dinner, and the patients (or the prisoners) were permitted to roam around certain regulated areas for two hours of "free time."

"If I see one more silly sitcom, or watch another "movie of the week" I swear I will go mad," Mona said to an attractive male orderly, who had been goggle-eyed over her ever since she got to the asylum. He dropped what he was doing to help her. She was having a hard time finding her room. Her sense of direction had been destroyed, because of the tranquilizers she was being forced to take morning, noon, and night.

"What is on the fourth floor?" she asked him.

"That's where they send you when you're bad," the orderly replied, as he led her down the long hallway. "Years ago they used to perform the lobotomies up there. Now a days, they call it

the frying floor."

"The frying floor?" she repeated, and her disbelieving tone of voice conveniently conveyed the comment into a direction question.

"Shock treatments," he told her.

Mona knew that the first floor was where the out patients stayed and they could come and go whenever they wished. The second floor was for cases considered less severe than the inmates on the third floor, but, like the prisoners on the third floor they too were not permitted to leave the premises. "Is there a basement?" she asked the orderly with a smile that seemed both sincere and sweeter than sugar itself.

"Yeah, baby, there's a basement. Why? You want me to take you down there sometime?" he asked, as he pinched her bottom.

"No," Mona said, flipping her long blond hair back off her face. "I want to know what's down there?"

"Storage. Spiders. Rats," he replied.

Mona's response was not to shiver, for the sake of there being spiders, or to reel for the reality of there being rats, like she would have done if the big strong orderly had had his way. Instead, she asked, "Who runs this place?"

"The warden."

"What's his name?"

"Zimmermann."

"Where's his office?"

"It's down on the first floor, and you sure do ask a lot of questions."

Every afternoon, unless it was raining, the patients were taken outside one floor at a time for what the doctor's and the nurse's called "a good healthy dose of exercise." Mona hated the white hospital gown she had to wear, but third floor patients were not permitted personal belongings. The hat and the sunglasses she wore whenever she went out were compliments of the lost and found. The sheet she sometimes covered herself with on a sunny day came from any number of linen closets. She had absolutely refused and had fought ferociously against going out into the sun without these protectants. Since it was hospital policy that all patients partake in "a healthy dose of exercise" Dr. Fleshman agreed to grant her this idiosyncrasy. To keep her quiet he would have agreed to grant her the world if it had been his to give. The only stipulation included in the deal was that she could not take the articles to her room. They had to be returned after each outing and picked up prior to leaving the building.

She noticed that the sky was clouding over quickly, yet she did not remove her sunglasses or her hat, because the harmful ultraviolet rays of the sun can come right through a cloud and can cause cancer, she thought to herself. On the news the other night she had heard that in southern Chile small animals, and people who worked out doors, were going blind, because of the thinning ozone layer. In Australia it was mandatory for school children to wear sunscreen lotion during recess. She saw Sigmund Fraud and his associate watching her, so she turned her back on them both and went looking for the gardener. Joseph Freeman was a friendly man who had taken a liking to Mona the day they met. "My little daffodil," he started calling her after their mind-boggling meeting many months ago. There was a reason for him picking that particular pet name as opposed to petunia or marigold or daisy or any of his other flowers which were presently at their florescent best.

Joseph kept good care of the grounds surrounding the asylum. He trimmed the shrubbery. He

cut the grass. And with affection he nurtured every flower bed as though the seeds he had planted earlier in the year were the offspring of his own sperm. Every blade of grass was a result of his green thumb and hard work. He was the only person at the asylum Mona would speak civilly to. He was kind hearted and compassionate and Mona considered him to be a "kindred spirit," for the sole reason that he was highly protective and extremely fond of his flowers. The day they met he had been down on his knees digging in the dirt when he noticed one of the patients having a dialogue with his daffodils.

"Your flowers adore you," Mona told him.

"They do, do they?"

"Yes, and your daffodils tell me that your wife died last year. You miss her very much, don't you?"

Joseph dropped the hand cultivator he had been holding. He looked in amazement at the woman. No one at the Institution knew about his wife's death. "I heard them say you could talk to plants, but I would never have believed it."

Mona laughed light heartedly. "I don't think they believe me either. And I'm not about to put on a demonstration for Sigmund Fraud."

"Who?" Joseph asked.

"Dr. Fleshman. I call him Sigmund Fraud, because... Well, because that's what he is."

"If you don't mind me asking, why did a delicate young thing like yourself go and kill all those people for? You're much too pretty to spend the rest of your life locked up in a place like this. It's a shame, it is. I don't care what they say about you."

"Me neither," Mona said.

"So it's really true, you can talk to plants?"

"They talk to me more than I talk to them," Mona confessed and for the first time since her incarceration she felt carefree.

Joseph was on his knees again today paying careful attention to his tulip bed when Mona, no longer in Dr. Fleshman's range of vision, sneaked up behind him. "Your tulips are quite talkative today," she told him. Her eyes were hidden by the dark glasses she was wearing. Most of her face was covered by the sheet she had folded over her head and had wrapped around her shoulders. The hat hid the rest. Joseph was startled, for he had no idea that Mona Babcock was behind him. After regaining his composure he got up off his knees, brushed some dirt off his overalls, and smiled. As a man in his early sixties he had a great deal of gray hair and Mona noticed for the first time that two of his front teeth were missing.

"The flower beds are all in full bloom," he told her, and since she would have felt silly asking her what the tulips were talking about today he asked instead how his little daffodil was doing.

"I'm fine, Joseph, but I wish they would feed me more."

He smiled and then he looked around to make sure they weren't being watched. After he was certain none of the guards were looking their way he reached into one of the pockets of his overalls and pulled out a package of unsalted sunflower seeds. He handed them to Mona.

"Munch on these. They're good for you. I'm not much of a meat eater myself."

"Thank you, Joseph," Mona said.

Then he spotted one of the guards watching them, so he bent back down and while he fussed with his flowers they continued to talk. "How is fuddy-duddy Dr. Fleshman treating you?"

Mona shook her head, and she was about to say that he wasn't treating her at all, but the

sound of a whistle blowing told her and the other patients their time was up. "Time to go back to my tomb," she teased. "Will I see you tomorrow?"

"Unless it rains, I'll be here," Joseph said. "I've been here for forty years."

As always she was the last patient to arrive back on the third floor, for she had to return the hat, the sunglasses, and the sheet. Dr. Fleshman stopped her in the hall to ask her how she was coming along. "I haven't come at all lately, love," she quipped coldly and then she carried on towards her room. As she passed the TV lounge several patients getting ready for group therapy giggled. Mona could tell they were up to something, but she had no way of knowing what. She stopped on the other side of the door way out of sight and listened.

"Miss stuck up," one of them said.

"She thinks she's Greta Garbo."

"She's in love with that ugly old black gardener."

She was relieved to reach her room, but as soon as she opened her door she saw the rose bush on the bed. Someone, or several someones, had pulled the plant out of the ground, either with or without gloves? Human hands, however, had plucked off all of its petals and leaves. Common sense told her the plant was suffering, but telepathically, she knew the plant was in pain. "Tell me who did this to you?" she said, but it was too traumatized to talk. She picked it up. "It's all right," she said soothingly to the dying rose bush. Then she remembered some of the patients had seen her talking to the rose bush the day before, but in order to have gotten it up to the third floor one or more of the staff must have helped. "It will be ok. I will make them pay for this, I promise." There were petals strewn all over her room, and after stooping over to pick up every last one of them she stuffed them into her pillow. She noticed blood smeared on her white hospital gown which at first she thought had come from the rose bush itself, but then she realized she had pricked her thumb on a thorn. "A mere drop in the buckets of blood that are about to permeate this place," she swore to herself in vengeance.

She had many problems with the staff at the asylum. One nurse in particular hated Mona, and Mona did not help the matter much by calling her Nurse Nightmare. She was the one that removed the rose bush from Mona's room, for she was on duty at the time. "Why did you do this?" the nurse asked.

"I didn't," Mona said, and then she pleaded for permission to replant it, but the nurse ignored her.

"And then they accused me of killing it," she complained to Joseph the following day. He was very sympathetic as always, but he was also upset. He did not appreciate patients using their petty squabbles as an excuse for "fucking with his flowers."

And just as he was telling Mona it was not her fault a vacant sounding voice came over the loud speaker across the hospital grounds. "Mona Babcock please return to your room for a visitor," the voice said.

She was delighted since she only received two visitors during her stay at the Institution, but that was two more than she had ever expected. Ozone Layer was the first. He visited her several times and each time he would bring her a box of hard candy and every time Mona would remark on the amount of weight he had lost since the last time she saw him. "Are you sick?" she asked him. "You look very pale and you're getting thinner and thinner?"

"I'm fine," Ozone would reply each time, but he became less convincing on every visit.

"Have you been to a doctor?"

"I wish I could have done more for you at the trial," he told her, as somehow he always

managed to sidetrack the question concerning his health. "I feel like it's partially my fault you were put in this place," he said.

"Don't be ridiculous. You did you best."

"At least in a prison they don't try to fuck with your mind."

"I can handle it," Mona replied.

"Well, no matter what they say you just remember that there is nothing wrong with your mind. They're the ones who need extensive therapy," he had stated on more than one occasion. "I was there in the courtroom. I saw what you did with those plants. I believe in you. Of course I don't believe in killing people, but you're a very special lady. Don't you ever forget that."

"I love you, Ozone Layer."

"I love you, Mona Babcock," Ozone replied and he was not the least bit embarrassed, though he doubted very much that she loved him in the same way, for after all she was a breathtaking voluptuous vision while he was seventy five and sickly.

Today, the day after the rose bush incident, Pandora was her other unexpected visitor.

"Honey, it's good to see you. You look a little tired. I'm sorry I haven't come sooner, but it's such a long drive, and I have to close the store, and..."

"How are my plants?" Mona interrupted.

"They're fine. The stores been busy. How are you doing? What a horrible place. They were downright mean to me when I signed in. I don't know how you stand it in this nut house? I suppose, you don't have any choice."

"It's good to see someone sane. Usually I have to look in the mirror. Every nurse and doctor in this dungeon is a fucking fruitcake. Mind you some of the orderlies are kind of cute," she remarked with a smile that was on the verge of being sheepish.

"Don't tell me you've had sex?" Pandora exclaimed.

"Twice. The first time two of the orderlies tied me up and the second time I sucked them off simultaneously while strapped into my straight jacket. Well don't look so shocked it was all in fun and they were both wearing condoms."

Pandora wasn't surprised or shocked. Nothing surprised or shocked Pandora, but...

"Sweetheart, you make it sound like you have your own straight jacket?"

Mona laughed. "I do. I'm put into one so often I decided to embroider my name on one for something to do."

Now it was Pandora's turn to laugh. "So, do you think you'll ever get out of here?" she inquired.

Mona shook her head with so much uncertainty something inside of her seemed to shake as well. She prayed that it wasn't her sanity that was shaky, but she very seldom allowed herself to dwell on the reality of having to live in an asylum for the criminally insane for the remainder of her life.

After a great deal of "girl talk" and a game of cards Pandora stood up and said, "I'd better be going, but I promise I'll come back to see you as soon as I can."

"I'm glad you came, and thanks again for the food." Pandora had brought her a basket from the store. It was full of fruits and nuts and all kinds of wholesome animal friendly products. Mona walked with her to the end of the hall and here they hugged. "Take care of yourself," Pandora pleaded.

"I will," Mona replied, and presently she could not help thinking about the only other person out there in the free world whom she sometimes prayed would pay her a visit, but of course he

never came.

After she walked Pandora to the end of the hall, which was as far as the patients were allowed to go, she started back towards her room. She passed the TV lounge, where some of the patients were watching The Wheel of Fortune. "MORONS," she shouted. Then she carried on until she came to Dr. Fleshman's door. It was slightly ajar, and when she happened to overhear the following obscene syllable "...cock," she stopped and listened.

"She is utterly out of control. I've increased her dosage, but the medication is not working. The nurses can't handle her. The orderlies have a hard time. Even the guards have to take extra precautions. She's so unpredictable. She's becoming more violent and more obsessed. I'm going to begin shock therapy."

"I fully agree," Dr. Fleshman's associate said.

"Even the other patients are terrified of her. Ever since that rose bush was discovered in her room."

"Has she tried to retaliate?"

"That's part of the problem. She hasn't done a darn thing. She keeps them afraid by letting them think she's about to get back at them in a big way. Simon, the axe murderer, won't go near her. And even Martha, the woman who murdered her entire family in a fit, is frightened of Mona Babcock."

"Does she still hear voices?"

"There has been no progress. I see her on the grounds every day talking to plants..."

"AND I AM PRIVILEGED," Mona hollered in the hall, and then she burst into Sigmund Fraud's office. After knocking nearly every article off his desk she slammed her clenched fist into his associate's face, which caused him and the wooden chair that he was sitting on to fall to the floor. She was just seconds away from smashing Dr. Fleshman's skull with an ashtray when the guards came. It took several strong men to strap her into a straight jacket.

"Send her up to the fourth floor," Dr. Fleshman shouted.

She awoke a week later from a coma like state to find herself in the recovery room on the fourth floor. She would soon learn that she had been the recipient of several scintillating shock treatments all in a row. Finally, after sedating her, two orderlies wheeled her back down to the third floor and into her old room. They unfastened the restraining straps that were on her wrists and around her ankles, and as they lifted her onto the bed they warned her repeatedly to be good. Though she was not sure she thought one of them looked familiar. "Didn't I suck you off?" she slurred.

In less than a month she was her usual self, and suffice to say, that's when she decided to write the letter. But, it took her another week to decide whether she should send it or not? Surely if she did it would put an irrevocable ending to any love he might still have for her. She finally made up her mind after she realized she had deliberated longer than the jury that sent her to the asylum. And, "So what if I send it?" she said to herself. "What's love got to do with it?"

Dear Unfaithful Feral: How are you my fiendish former friend? I am fine, thank you very much for inquiring about me. Fortunately for you, I am locked away forever in this dungeon of despair, but I just wanted to let you know that we're not finished yet, not by far, Feral F. Forrester. Meanwhile, give my love to Frenzy, and if you've got a gun, say hello for me to Jane, the Jezebel. And by the way, when you dream about me, like I know you do, my darling, DO YOU WAKE UP IN A COLD SWEAT SCREAMING?"

Raven is ready to begin working on his next chapter when Rebecca rushes into the room. "Raven, you'll never guess what I just found in the pantry?"

"A cockroach?"

"No, of course not, you silly bird. A picture of Puff."

Raven looks at the snapshot Rebecca gives him to see that it is indeed a Polaroid picture of Puff. Quite probably it is the only picture of Puff in existence, for Raven remembers the dragon, one day, saying, "I'm very camera shy. I have to be. I can't have everyone in the world knowing about me, and a picture would be proof positive that I exist," he explains to Rebecca, who at the time is trying to get him to pose. "I'm sorry, my dear, I have no desire to see myself on the evening news, or to have scores of scientists at the entrance of my cave."

It is several years ago at a picnic when the picture is taken. After a great deal of cajoling on Rebecca's behalf Puff finally agrees to let her take one shot if she promises not to show it to anyone. "Michelangelo pleaded to paint me once, but I flatly refused," Puff points out.

In the picture, Puff's eyes are blood shot and he is slouched in a lawn chair with a sorrowful expression on his five thousand year old face. His supply of heroin has been delayed and no doubt about it he is deeply despaired by the agony of withdrawal that he is undergoing. He's been smoking pot and a lot of it "to ease the pain," as Puff himself so plaintively puts it. "Suffering from the shakes and severe stomach cramps," he complains to anyone at the picnic who will listen.

Raven often wonders where he gets his drugs, but he doesn't dare ask, unlike Mr. Bear and Bachelor Buck who either have more than enough nerve or don't know any better. "Puff, where do you get your stuff, anyhow?" they ask at the picnic.

"None of your bloody business Mr. Bear and Bachelor Buck, so why don't the two of you leave me alone. Go into the bushes and do whatever it is you do?" Puff had said in an obvious huff.

Raven takes a closer look at the picture he is holding. In the background Bachelor Buck and Mr. Bear are holding onto each other. They are playing in a three legged race and are having a difficult time since between the two of them they have eight legs. To their left Sea Gull is sitting at a table with some feminine fowl whose name Raven can not remember. In the upper right hand corner of the picture there is a foxes tail. Raven props the picture up against his typewriter. He stares at the photo some more in melancholy. He misses Puff very much. To this day the dragon's death is a shock. "He is going to live forever," was the assumption of every animal. "He has been alive for five thousand years. What could possibly kill him?"

"Are you immortal?" Raven can remember asking him.

"I'm just very old," Puff replies.

Raven is very young when he first meets the dragon, and it is at the same time that he meets Sea Gull. Sea Gull is very instrumental in arranging the meeting. "You wish to go to Puff's place? Well, my friend, it's very difficult to find. If you're flying, and I presume you are, the best course to take is one mile directly west of the shoreline. You must go very early in the morning. If you want to meet the dragon it must be dawn, and there must be a morning mist. But, even then, if he doesn't want to be seen by you, you'll never be able to find him. He can be a very devious dragon. He has to be. He's the last of his kind," Sea Gull explains.

"Thank you," Raven says, as he starts to fly away.

"Wait, if I might ask, why do you wish to meet the dragon?"

Raven looks down at the ground and all around to make sure no one else is listening. "One day," he says into the wind, "I am going to write a book and I want the dragon to be a part of it." He feels safe saying this to Sea Gull, because even then his instincts told him that he is the type of bird that can be trusted.

"Good luck," Sea Gull says.

The next morning Raven leaves long before the break of day, and there is a mist, but the dragon is nowhere to be found. He spots Mr. Dolphin swimming along the surface of the water, so he flies down to say good morning.

"Good morning, young Raven."

He perches precariously on Mr. Dolphin's dorsal fin, after an invitation to do so, and fortunately Mr. Dolphin is an excellent enough swimmer to keep Raven from being dunked into the salty sea water more than once.

"Sorry about that, Raven," says Mr. Dolphin with a bit of a grin.

"No harm done, Mr. Dolphin."

Mr. Whale and his wife go by. They bid the bird and the dolphin a good day. Just after they are out of sight something else starts rising out of the sea. Large bubbles break the otherwise calm surface, as Puff himself appears from somewhere far below the surface of the sea, surprising not only Raven, but Mr. Dolphin as well.

"Hello. Hello. My name is Raven, and..."

Puff laughs, and it is an extremely loud laugh. "I know who you are good chap, and I know why you've come. You want to write a book."

Dolphin has to circle around the dragon before he can slow himself down enough to stop, while young Raven finds himself fluttering in fear of the dragon. For several more moments he remains perched upon Mr. Dolphin's dorsal fin, even though he feels like flying far away. Mr. Dolphin knows the dragon, so he is not at all afraid, and treading water with his strong tail he keeps himself and the big black bird in the same spot.

"Well, what are you waiting for? Hop on my back, bird," Puff hollers. "I'll take you to my cave."

"You had better hurry and do what he says," instructs Mr. Dolphin. "It's not very often that he offers such an invitation."

Raven, no longer as fearful of the dragon as he was a few moments ago, thanks Mr. Dolphin before he flaps his wings and flies onto the dragon's back, which is armored with a serrated ridge that runs right down the entire length of his long tail. The dragon dives under the water and Raven has to take to the air to avoid being submerged. Promptly, Puff resurfaces. He rolls onto his back, belly up, for a good long hearty laugh. When at last he stops laughing, he says, "Stay on my back, comrade, and hold your breath."

"We have to go under the water?" Raven asks, not at all sure that he likes the idea, for he is definitely not a water fowl.

"You'll be fine. It's not far," Puff assures him, so this time Raven holds on tightly with his talons as they plunge straight down to the bottom of the sea. He has never been beneath the ocean before. Mr. Whale and his wife, who look even larger under water, stop to bid good day to the dragon. And to Raven, who is watching them as they slowly swim away, they are two of the most majestic mammals in all of the world. Soon after he sees several colorful fish swimming in a school. Then he spots a large shark looming in the murky water and his tiny heart begins to beat faster, but Mr. Shark just glides by gracefully and good-naturedly.

"Morning, Mr. Shark," says Puff, blowing bubbles as he breathes.

"Good morning, Puff. I see you have a visitor this morning," says Mr. Shark.

Swimming along the ocean bed towards the shoreline they arrive at the cave none too soon, for Raven is right out of air. They come up through an underwater passageway into an open area. Raven is rather uneasy though when he finds out they are not safely above sea level like he assumed. Huge boulders overhead covered with crystal and limestone deposits shaped like icicles make for a splendid ceiling. Raven is surprised to learn, when Puff mentions something about "the humans being up above," that they are directly beneath the town of Raven Rock. An eerie feeling fills the damp underground acrid air, and even the water dripping off the dragon's back echoes throughout the colossal cavern. "What's that smell?" Raven asks.

"I'm afraid it's the Raven Rock's sewer system seeping through the ground," Puff replies.

Then while drying his feathers off with a towel given to him by Puff, Raven asks, "Do you breathe both air and water?"

"I have a pair a lung and a set of gills that are interchangeable," Puff explains.

"Are you a fire breathing dragon as well?" Raven asks with wide eyes.

Puff's laughter seems even louder now, because it bounces, like a big rubber ball, back and forth against the walls of the cave. "When I eat pizza with hot peppers anything is possible," he replies.

They are both dried off by now and inside the living quarters of the cave, which is lavishly decorated and quite cozy. Puff has artifacts that date back to the beginning of civilization. In one corner there stands a statue of Homer from the fourth century B.C. In another corner there is a pile of Ming vases. In another Egyptian pots and pans also from fourth century B.C. Roman paintings cover the damp walls of the caves and Raven is sure they are priceless. "Oh, probably," Puff replies.

"There is no sunlight?" Raven realizes. The cave is lit by candlelight.

"The sun is very bad for dragons. I never venture out during the daylight. Only at night do I surface, or very early in the morning when there is a mist."

After they sit down in a pair of chairs that recline Puff pulls out a package of rolling papers, an oriental pipe, a bag full of pot, a huge chunk of hashish, a book of matches, and a gadget commonly called a roach-clip. The joint he rolls is humongous even by the standards set in a Cheech and Chong movie, and instead of using the book of matches he lights the "reefer" with his breath, with a foot long flame of fire that escapes from his cavernous mouth. "Wow," exclaims Raven, who is slightly suspicious, for it would seem the dragon is showing off.

"I very seldom have visitors," Puff says. "Sea Gull comes occasionally, and Rabbit whom I believe you know came once, but he didn't like the swim. He nearly drowned."

Now, Raven is sure that Puff is showing off when the marijuana cigarette goes out, for he

fires it up with a flame that is four feet in length. What he is not sure about are Puff's reason's for smoking the smelly stuff? "Why do you smoke that stinky weed?" he wonders aloud.

"To get stoned," Puff replies. "Plus, it takes my pain away. It makes me feel good again."

"Isn't it bad for you?" Raven asks naively, for this is before he knows about all the other drugs the dragon digests to keep himself going from day to day.

"The pollution," Puff says, sounding as sad as a sailor without a sea, "has been bothering me lately."

"I don't much like it myself," Raven replies.

"Here, then, have a puff."

Raven, holding the joint flimsily between two very tense talons, puts it up to his beak and breathes.

"You have to suck in the smoke," Puff points out with a smile that displays several rows of his razor sharp teeth. "That's right, now hold the smoke in your lungs for as long as possible to get the most effect. Now, take another drag." He fills his pipe with a piece of hashish and he proceeds to pass it to Raven as well, for by now the joint is nearly gone. Raven chokes.

"So, bird, you want to write a book?"

"Yes. Yes. Indeed I do. I'm a voracious reader. I dream about becoming a writer."

"Well stop dreaming about it and do it. I write poetry," Puff adds pointedly. "One day I will let you read one of my poems."

"I would like that very much, Puff," Raven replies, and for the first time he feels the loneliness and the despair of the dragon. He is also beginning to feel funny all over from the effects of the THC. His feathers all are fluffy, like his head, and it seems he is floating around the room, when all of a sudden he starts to get sick to his stomach. "I should leave. The room is spinning," he states, "or, maybe I should lie down. No, I'd better go. I'm getting married tomorrow. My fiancée will be worried."

"Well, congratulations, bird. What's her name?"

"Rebecca, and she is the most beautiful bird I have ever seen."

Puff rises ceremoniously to his feet. "Come along then, I shall see you safely to the surface."

Looking at the picture of Puff reminiscently Raven wishes with all his heart for the power to bring him back into existence. He wants to talk to him about the book, about Mother Nature, about the banning, about the building of bombs, about anything and everything, but of course he can't.

Puff is very supportive when Raven first tells him that he is ready to begin writing the novel.

"Good for you. I'm very, very pleased to hear that. This calls for a celebration. I was beginning to wonder if it wasn't just a pipe dream?" he says, and then he pulls out his oriental pipe. "No pun intended," he laughs long and hard. "By the way, bird, did I tell you that I'm a poet in my spare time?"

"Yes," Raven softly says. He knows that Puff's memory is sometimes poor, but back then he believes it is from the drugs he abuses. Later he learns the problem was toxic waste from the town of Raven Rock rapidly eating away at his brain.

"Allow me to read to you one of my poems," Puff says. He is in a particularly playful mood that day, because of a shipment of high grade heroin he has just received, and has already tested twice. It is the day after the picnic. The picnic where he allows Rebecca to take the picture. The first, and only, photo in five thousand years. "Vincent van Gogh wanted to paint my portrait, but I told him the same thing I told Leonardo da Vinci and all the others, but maybe now the time

has come. All right, Rebecca, go ahead and take your best shot."

Does Puff know at the time that he is about to die? Raven wonders. He allows Rebecca, a bird, to take a Polaroid picture after five thousand years of refusing offers from some of the world's most prominent painters? At the picnic he stays out in the sun all day seemingly indifferent. Sure he shields himself with a beach blanket and a big umbrella, but he is still taking a chance and he acts like it no longer matters, even though on several occasions Raven can clearly recall Puff himself saying, "Sunlight can kill a dragon."

"Yes, please read me one of your poems."

"Very well, but first I must go into my bedroom. It's that time of day," he states, and with him he takes a syringe.

"Now, let me see," he says when he returns, "how does it go? Oh yes, Puff, the daring dragon, lives by the sea, he frolics... I can't remember the next line. I wonder why that is? Oh, yes, he frolics in the morning mist, as happy as can be... No, that can't be right, but it doesn't matter, because I can't remember the rest."

Raven has a poem of his own on the tip of his tongue he would like to share, but does he dare recite it?

"Puff, the dying dragon
lives in despair
and the drugs that he is addicted to
are the crutch that keeps him there..."

Puff is presently so high on heroin he does not hear Raven's penetrating poem. And even though Raven is deeply concerned about the welfare of his friend and his dependency on drugs he has no idea at the time the danger the dragon is in and that very soon he will die from an overdose. Not an overdose of drugs. He will die from too much toxic waste.

Rebecca returns to Raven's study with a silver picture frame in her possession. "I thought we could put Puff's picture in this and place him on the mantel above the fireplace," she says.

"That's a wonderful idea," Raven tells her, as he passes her the picture. "Rebecca, you know that book of poems that Puff left me when he died?"

"Yes dear, I do. What about it?"

"They are nothing but incoherent scribbles that sadly make no sense whatsoever."

"The poor thing," she replies.

"Well, I've decided that I will write a poem in Puff's honor."

"Will you be working late tonight?" she asks her husband.

"I'm afraid so. I've started another chapter."

"I'm going to bed. Don't stay up too long. Good night, dear," she says and then she leans over so that they might brush beaks.

For the moment Raven puts Puff out of his mind as much as possible. He has something more urgent on his agenda. He has spent several sleepless nights trying desperately to come up with a name for the raven he is on the verge of writing about in his next chapter. Staring out the window at the night sky in search of some inspiration it seems this evening the stars have nothing spectacular to say. Even the moon herself is strangely silent. He wonders, what on earth can I call the big, strong, black red-blooded bird?

REDBLOOD: THE RAVEN

The bird was wholly black. He was twenty five inches in length from the tip of his wedge-shaped tail to the end of his large beak. He had a wing span of four feet and when he was airborne he could be a bit of an acrobat. Whenever he wished to communicate with another creature, be it bird or beast, he could make several different singsong sounds, but his most common "quork" was a calling card that could be heard for more than a mile away. He spent much of his time by the seashore where he nested on the ledge of a cliff. He fed on whatever food he could find: fish, small furry mammals, but mostly he dined on the dead. The decaying carcasses he came across were his main source of meat for many a meal.

It was the middle of the night in Montana. Mona was sound asleep when the bird broke into her room. It was a warm summer evening and her window was open wide. The bird was able to fit between the bars and fly right into the room. She was awakened by the sound of his wings beating above her head. She recognized him right away. It was Redblood, the raven she had nursed back to health. He was full grown now.

"Redblood, what are you doing here?" she whispered to the bird, who had perched herself upon her pillow; and he was infuriated by the fact that it was feather filled.

"I know just how you feel, but there's not much that I can do about it," Mona said.

"You could murder the manufacturer," Redblood quipped.

"I would if I could," Mona said and then she scratched the top of Redblood's head and she ruffled his feathers affectionately, for she remembered how much he liked to be stroked. "It's good to see you, but why have you come all this way? Is something wrong?"

"I've come to help you escape."

"That's impossible. Have you seen the security in this place? It's a facsimile of Fort Knox." She was extremely sluggish, for Dr. Fleshman had doubled her dosage of drugs, again. She shook her head to clear her mind as much as she could and then she thought for a moment or more before she said, "Unless, unless I can come up with a plan? A perfect plan. One that is fullproof."

"You saved my life," Redblood reminded her. He was still perched on the repugnant pillow. "We are friends. You fixed my wing and you gave me my freedom. Now, I've come to return the favor. I am going to give you your freedom."

"You know, you look like a prince perched on my pillow," she informed him. She kissed him on the beak and then she straightened herself up and with her back against the wall, she whispered, "All right, to begin with I'll need a disguise. Bring me a dress. Get one off a clothes line. And some shoes, and some scissors, and a pair of eyeglasses. Anything you can find to help me alter my appearance. Do you understand?"

Redblood quietly quorked.

"Good, and hide everything in the woods. That's where we'll meet."

Redblood quorked some more and then he went back out the window. By now Mona was wide awake and she paced in her room for the rest of the night. Until now she had never really thought about breaking out. Oh, she'd considered climbing the twenty five foot barbed wire fence on more than one claustrophobic occasion. Several times she had even envisioned flinging

herself (somehow) over the fence. It was unfortunate she could not fly was the conclusion she came to on each occasion. Then there was the problem of getting off the third floor through all the locked doors; and the night nurse was another problem she could not presently see past. Even if she did manage to make it outside how would she get over that fucking fence? If she did try to climb it she would probably wind up entangled in the barb wire. A thought, however, occurred to her. She wondered how much she weighed? A hundred and ten pounds perhaps? Well, the first thing she'd do when she got out was eat. Yes, a soybean burger, some Tofu, and a spinach salad, she swore, were all waiting for her to feast upon once she was free. She got her mind off the hunger pain in her stomach by thinking some more about the fence. If Redblood could gather one hundred of his feathered friends together the whole flock could lift her over the fence? At approximately one hundred and ten pounds that would be a little over one pound per bird. But, they would need a rope, a rope that all one hundred of them could hold onto? She decided the idea was dumb and in despair she went over to her window. She was staring at the moon when she raised her arms and then she let them fall to her side. It seemed like the most natural thing in the world for her to do at the time. She flapped them faster and faster forty or fifty times until she was tired. "If only I could fly," she spoke to the shadow she saw of herself on the wall. "O man," she said to the moon, "if only I had wings and could fly over that fucking fence."

The following night Redblood returned and perched at the foot of Mona's bed he told her that he had located many of the articles that she wanted. "I have only a few more to find."

"That's wonderful, Redblood, but I can't think of a way out."

"I have some more good news," he told her with a tone of voice that was altogether teasing.

"Tell me. What?"

"It's about the fence."

"What about the fence? You've figured a way for me to get over it?" she asked passionately, hereby dispelling the opinion formulated by Dr. Fleshman that Mona was forever apathetic.

"Not over it, under it," Redblood replied.

With her eyebrows knotted in puzzlement, Mona asked, "How?"

"Mr. Badger is going to dig a tunnel for you to crawl through."

Mona laughed and then she laughed some more until finally she could not stop laughing. She buried her face in a blanket and cried, "I'm free. I'm free."

Nurse Nightmare was making her rounds when she heard Mona's laughter and decided to investigate. She gasped, God did she gasp, at the sight of the big black ominous looking bird on the Babcock woman's bed. She glanced at the God awful glare in the Babcock woman's evil eyes and then she made the sign of the cross and rushed to find a guard. There was something about that "Babcock bitch" that absolutely terrified her. "That woman sends shivers up and down my spine. She scares me more than the spiders in the basement," Nurse Nightmare announced to one of her peers. She had worked at the Institution for twelve years and she had seen her share of psychopathic personalities, but Mona was the meanest mass murderer she had ever had the displeasure of meeting.

"There is a full moon next week. Meet me in the woods at midnight," Mona said. "Now you had better leave before they come back."

Redblood told her that he'd be there and that he'd inform Mr. Badger. Then he quickly went out the window and on his way.

The next morning the caretaker came. Following the instructions of Dr. Fleshman he put a

look on Mona's window. They also turned on the video camera in her room. "I want that wicked woman watched twenty four hours a day," Dr. Fleshman informed the staff.

Joseph Freeman noticed there was something different about his little Daffodil. It seemed to him that her mind was, more often than not, a million miles away. If you only knew, Mona thought, and she had to stop herself from confiding in him. She was certain that he could be trusted, but in case she was caught she did not want to get him into trouble.

"You look very pretty today," he told her, but Mona barely heard him. She was busy thinking about the warden, for in his office on his desk she remembered, from her one and only visit, that there was a potted plant, and it was going to help her escape. It was, in fact, the most important part of her plan.

"Why do you want to see the warden?"

"I wish to discuss a private matter of utmost importance," she said to Dr. Fleshman.

"Well, he's a very busy man, but I'll see if I can make an appointment, and by the way, why was there a bird in your room?"

She leaned forward and she stared straight into Dr. Fleshman's eyes. You tight assed shrink, she thought to herself. "What makes you think there was a bird in my room?"

"The night nurse said there was. She swears she saw one."

"Well, you can both swear all you like, but it's not very fucking becoming." Mona smiled and then she stood up and left his office. In the hall she bumped into Sigmund Fraud's associate. She nearly knocked him over. "Get out of my way, Knucklehead," she snapped, for that was her nickname for him.

The warden was not especially eager to see Mona Babcock, but it was hospital policy, so he had to comply. Still, he was slightly suspicious. Why had the patient put in a formal request to talk with him personally when she was notorious for not speaking to anyone in the hospital with the exception of the gardener? "Have a seat, Miss Babcock, and make yourself comfortable," he said.

"Thank you, sir," she said in return.

"Now, what was it that you wanted to talk to me about?"

"Well, warden, I would like to turn over a new leaf..." She was gazing intently at the geranium on his desk, and with nothing more than her mind she asked the plant if there was a master key. "And if there is, where does the warden keep it?"

"Yes," the plant telepathically replied, "it's in the top left hand drawer of his desk."

Mona was delighted. "Does he lock the desk drawer?"

"Only at night when he leaves the office."

"If I take it now when will he notice it missing?"

"Not until tomorrow."

"Tell me what the warden is thinking right now?" she thought.

"He's thinking about your last visit when you first came to the Institution. He's thinking about how much he likes your legs. He's hoping you don't do anything destructive like you did the last time. He wishes he could see your..." the plant paused, "pussy," but he's afraid of you. He's afraid of his wife. He's afraid of women. And you in particular scare the..." again the plant even telepathically had a problem pronouncing the word, "the 'shit' out of him."

"Oh, really," Mona mumbled to herself. She looked at the warden who was watching her intently. He looked away and she knew then that she could have her way. Anyway she wanted it. She licked her lips. "I also wanted to see you, because I watch you all the time when you pass

by in the hallway and I can't tell you how terribly turned on I get each time."

The warden blushed. "Miss Babcock, I'm flattered, but I'm a happily married man. Like I was saying you've been here for five years now and I think it's time..."

"He's lying," said the plant. "He wants you. He's already erect."

"I'm so horny," Mona sighed suddenly. "You're right it has been five long years since I've been fucked." And with this she raised her white gown and her voice and she said, "FUCK ME. FUCK ME ON YOUR DESK. FUCK ME GOOD AND HARD YOU BIG STRONG MAN. FUCK ME. FUCK ME. FUCK ME."

The warden was eager to have his way as well. Any way she wanted it. He did not hesitate at all. He stood up. He crossed the room and he locked the door; and while he was driving his "pathetically puny" penis into her "pussy" she reached for his desk drawer. "Damn it," she said, for it was too far away.

"What did you say?" the warden asked without stopping what he was doing.

"I said, damn it, it feels good." She hoisted herself up higher. She spread her legs even wider, and with her mind set solely on seducing the warden she said, "EAT ME."

So, while the warden had his head down between her legs, Mona was able to open his desk drawer and snatch the key that would unlock every door that she desired. Now, with the key clenched in her hand, she had to think of a way to get by Nurse Nightmare, who would be working the graveyard shift tonight. She also had to think of a way to get Zimmermann to hurry up and finish. "GET YOUR FILTHY FUCKING FACE OUT FROM BETWEEN MY LEGS."

The full Montana moon shone through her window and illuminated her room with its golden glow. It was eleven thirty. In half an hour the guards would be changing and she would have fifteen minutes to get out of the building. Before she left, however, she had to take care of some unfinished business. With her back to the video camera she picked up her pillow and took out the dried up petals that were hidden inside, which had once belonged to the rose bush. By now they were brittle, so she had to be extremely careful not to crush them, as she put them into the pockets of her white gown. When she was finished filling her pockets she laid down on her bed. With a blanket covering her body, and with her eyes closed, she waited calmly until she heard Nurse Nightmare coming down the hall right on time. "Quork. Quork. Quork," Mona sounded.

Nurse Nightmare, a fairly large woman, heard what she believed was "that big, black, ominous looking bird," but how could it have gotten back into the Babcock woman's room? Her curiosity helped her to overcome her fear, and furthermore it was her duty as night nurse to make sure the patients were behaving themselves. With her key she opened the door. She could barely believe she was going into the Babcock woman's room by herself, since she had sworn to herself several months ago that she would never be foolhardy enough to do so. It was midnight, however, and the guards were busy changing shifts, so she entered against her will. Safely inside, she shined her flashlight on the bed. "Babcock, are you awake?" she spoke sternly. She turned the beam of light towards the ceiling, and she was surprised to see no sign of the bird. She shined it on the window which was closed. "Babcock, are you awake?" she called again. "Answer me," she demanded. Mona made no reply, so while looking in every conceivable corner of the room for the bird that she was positive she had heard, Nurse Nightmare moved closer to the bed.

Mona not only remained motionless, she made sure her breathing had the sound of someone sleeping. In her hand, however, she was holding onto the small cultivator that she had stolen from Joseph the day before. This morning, and late last night, she had spent several hours

sharpening the three prongs on one of her cement walls. The one the video camera could not see.

Shining the flashlight directly down upon Mona's immobile face, Nurse Nightmare leaned over the bed and she was about to give the Babcock woman a good shake when Mona opened her eyes and Nurse Nightmare was struck violently on her forehead. She stumbled backwards. The flashlight fell to the floor and rolled across the room, but through the blood on her face, and by the light of the moon, Nurse Nightmare was able to see her assailant stand; her arm was raised and in her hand she was clutching the cultivator. Undoubtedly, it was aimed directly at her, and indubitably, the steel claws were a lethal weapon. She turned to flee from the room, but her attempt to save herself was ill-timed, for Mona, the murderess, sunk the steel claws of the cultivator into the back of her head before she was halfway to the door. With the gardener's tool embedded in her brain, she dropped down to her knees. Mona jumped on her back. She wrapped her legs around Nurse Nightmare's waist and with all her strength she thrust the handle that she was holding forward. When the steel claws came out so did a section of her skull and, "Some of the strangest looking slime I have ever seen," Mona would later say.

Mona had a heyday hitting her in the head over and over again, but she had one hell of a hard time trying to drag the dead body down the hallway. Finally she pushed the cultivator into Nurse Nightmare's neck, and she used the three prongs to pull her along, leaving a trail of blood from her jugular vein all the way into the TV room. There Mona decorated the corpse with the dried up petals, all in fulfillment of her promise to the dying rose bush.

Five minutes later she was outside by the fence searching frantically for the hole that Mr. Badger was supposed to have dug, and wishing she had thought to bring the flashlight. She had looked for the hole that afternoon, but, perhaps he had not started digging until this evening? Or, maybe he had dug only part way and had finished the last few feet tonight so that no one would notice it? Regardless of when it was dug she was relieved when she found it and she was thrilled when she was able to crawl under the fence with plenty of room to spare.

Mona was the first patient to ever break out of the two hundred year old institution. "After five long years I am finally free," she exclaimed to herself. And, so far, her getaway had gone precisely as planned. Granted, she was in the woods, but she was still within walking distance of "that dungeon." She was, in fact, only five hundred feet away from "the funny farm," so even though her mind was a million miles away from "the madhouse" her body had a long way to travel before "the insane asylum" would be safely behind her. "That may be," she said to all of the memories that haunted her menacingly, "but for the moment I'm free."

"You're not out of the woods yet," a firefly, who overheard her declaration of freedom felt that it was his duty to inform her, and since she was still standing in a silhouette of the monstrous stone building she was inclined to believe the bug.

"Redblood, are you there? Redblood, where are you?"

Redblood did not come to her right away. He had seen her crawl under the fence, but first he wanted to make sure no one else had seen her leave, so he circled the asylum several times. After he was convinced that it was safe he flew into the woods to find Mona, and after doing so he took her to where he had carefully hidden all of the articles of clothing he had collected. She eagerly ripped off the white hospital gown she was wearing and reached for the fabulous green dress that Redblood had stolen from a clothes line. The dress didn't fit as snugly as she would have liked, but he brought a black vinyl belt made out of that went perfectly with the outfit. She spotted the scissors buried beneath some leaves, so she grabbed them and chopped off her hair which had grown very long. She had not allowed anyone to cut it in five years. "You're beautiful

hair," Redblood cried.

"It can't be helped," Mona replied.

Redblood had even been bright enough to bring a mirror. "So you can see what you're doing," he said, though it was too dark in the woods. "Turn towards the moonlight," he told her.

The shoes he'd found fit and even more miraculously they matched the dress, but they were leather so Mona did not like them and under normal circumstances would have been abhorred to have put them on her feet. Redblood removed some more leaves and he revealed the purse he had plucked from a woman in a park. She had reported the theft to the police and in the paper the following day, it said: Big black bird steals woman's purse and flies away!

"Possibly," some concerned citizen suggested, "she had some popcorn or peanuts in the purse?"

"MONEY," Mona yelled much louder than she should have considering the circumstances. "There's money in this purse, and make up. Redblood, you're magnificent." She left the lot of credit cards and the woman's identification, for she was sure it would not be safe to use either. She was about to bury them in the ground along with her long locks of hair and her hospital gown, but Redblood said it would be better if he disposed of them somewhere else. So she wrapped everything into the hospital gown and then she gave the bundle to Redblood to get rid of. She tried on the pair of reading glasses that were also in the purse. "Perfect," she said. Then she put the glasses back and headed for the highway as fast as her feet would allow her to fly. She only had a few hours before morning when they would notice her missing and discover Nurse Nightmare's body.

As she walked down the deserted highway late at night in the middle of what might just as well have been the planet mars, she asked herself, how would she ever get a ride? When would she ever see a car? And what will happen if a car does come and someone who works at the asylum is inside?

An hour later Redblood swooped down from the sky to tell her that a truck was coming. Mona wiggled and whistled and waved to the driver, and it worked!

"Good bye, Redblood," she called to her savior, who was sitting atop of a telephone pole and was ever so proud of himself. He watched a completely different looking woman, from the one who had escaped less than two hours ago, climb into the cab of the truck.

Wearing a bright green dress, high heels, and a new hairdo, Mona Babcock boarded a bus and returned temporarily to the town of Raven Rock. Redblood also returned to Raven Rock and to his cliff side home by the sea. On his way he disposed of the blood stained hospital gown, the strands of hair, and the credit cards, by dropping them two thousand feet onto a Montana mountain top several miles away from the madhouse. Strangely enough and unbeknown to the bird it was the same mountain in which Adolph Hitler was hiding.

Two days after her disappearance Mona rented a room in a rundown motel on the outskirts of town. She died her blond hair black and she bought an overcoat to match her dress. She did not fit the description the hospital released to the police, or to the picture she saw of herself on the front page of the morning newspaper. The nations most environmentally friendly fiend is free! After murdering the night nurse in cold blood at the institution where she has been incarcerated for the past five years, Mona Babcock, has escaped. The police have in their possession a video tape of the ghastly murder. The guard on duty that was supposed to be watching the patients rooms on his monitor was called away by a big black bird he claims was pecking wildly at his window. Police believe the Babcock woman may have returned to her

hometown in the State of Washington. She is possibly armed and is considered extremely dangerous, so be on the look out for a woman who gets all worked up when she hears the words: Toxic Waste! All you kids better be careful and keep your candy wrappers in your pockets where they belong, and the new Mayor of Raven Rock had better start keeping his environmental promises unless he is disposed to having his head chopped off by a psychopathic serial killer?

The egg that Rebecca is about to lay will be her last, and it, like the others she had just laid, will be large, giving her a great deal of discomfort, and green, giving the nursery a contrast in color. She is squatting on the brand new nest that Raven built out of broken branches in one of their spare bedrooms. It is a very special time for them both, because this is going to be their first brood. Raven is enjoying himself immensely, and he is foolhardy enough to believe that Rebecca is also having a good time. "Are you having fun?" he is actually naive enough to ask.

"FUN?" Rebecca screams. "Are you out of your fucking mind? It hurts like hell. FUN?" she screams again. "All you had to do was fertilize them. You're the one who had all the FUN."

Raven has never heard Rebecca swear before, so he figures that it is safe to assume she is not enjoying herself. "I'm sorry, sweetheart," he says, for he is slightly afraid to say anything else.

"Here it comes," she groans and with one of her wings she wipes away the sweat on her brow just above her beak.

"Is that the last egg?" he asks.

"Were you expecting an even dozen?"

"No, five is fine. I'm thrilled. I am going to be the father of five baby birds."

Very slowly she extracts herself from the nest without saying anything. Raven can't stop himself from staring in disbelief at the bull-legged way his wife is walking. "Are you all right?" he wants to know. "How do you feel? You must be exhausted. You look terrible."

"You'd look terrible too if you'd just laid five eggs. To tell you the truth, though, I am a little tired. I think I'll lie down in the living room and watch my soap opera. Will you sit on the eggs?"

"Certainly," he says. He is eager for the opportunity to do his part. Secretly he is glad that it is a painless part that he gets to play. He plans, however, on being the best possible parent he can be. He helps Rebecca down the stairs and into the living room. Then he leaves her there with the TV remote and returns to the nursery.

He is a little nervous and extremely careful when he gets onto the nest for the first time. He feels very protective, which he presumes is just one of the effects of fatherhood. Sitting on the eggs, that his wife has just laid, it is not difficult for him to remember fondly back to his courtship of Rebecca. It is several years ago not long after he met Puff for the first time, but even now he can't help cooing, as he recalls that magical moment when they met. There are over five hundred birds gathered that day at the communal roost, but like a swan surrounded by a bunch of ugly ducklings Rebecca is by far the loveliest raven in the flock. He remembers fluffing his throat feathers with the hopes that she will find him favorable. She is playing hard to get, however, so he flies to a height of twenty five hundred feet, and to impress her even further he drops head first towards the ground at an incredible speed. Twisting and twirling his daredevil dive is the envy of every bird in the aviary. Seconds away from the ground he spreads his wings,

rolls in the air, and soars triumphantly to the top of a nearby tree. By now Rebecca is beside herself she is so smitten. She promptly perches herself in the same pine tree. And like a rare love story, one that has a happy ending, they have been inseparable ever since. "Quork. Quork. Quork," they croon to each other that glorious day all in the name of love.

When they are married a week later Rabbit is chosen to give Rebecca away at the wedding; while Puff gives the newlyweds a present that surpasses all others. "I want you to have my artifacts as a gift," he says. "Sell them and build yourselves a home."

At first Raven is reluctant to let Puff part with his priceless possessions, but Puff is very persistent. "I won't take no for an answer," he says.

Raven sees it now as another sure sign that Puff is conscious of his chronic condition prior to his passing away. He has no idea at the time, though, that the dragon is doing to die, so he assumes it is simply benevolence on Puff's behalf. Raven sells the artifacts to an art dealer in the city of Seattle, who is astounded by both the treasures before him and by the vocabulary of "the bird."

"Are you sure there won't be a draft?" Rebecca asks when Raven begins building his nest by the window on top of a table.

"No need to worry. I put in an extra pane of glass and then I put lots of caulking around the window," he tells her at the time.

Presently, shifting his weight on the eggs Raven writes a few illustrious lines in his notebook. He absentmindedly taps the ball point pen against his beak. The sound reminds him of an egg shell cracking open. It also reminds him of his own mother who is shot by a farmer right in front of him. He is a fledgling at the time feeding in the farmer's field when the shotgun blast, which blows his mother away, teaches him at a tender age to be fearful of firearms. It also teaches him to stay well away from the human race.

Deciding it is time to check on Rebecca he finds her in the kitchen cooking up a storm. "What are you doing?" he asks angrily. "You should be resting."

"Sally and Sea Gull are coming for dinner. Don't you remember? We invited them last week."

"No, I completely forgot, but under the circumstances I'm sure they will understand if we cancel?"

"Nonsense. I feel fine," she assures him.

"Well, let me help. I don't want you to overexert yourself."

When the four birds sit down for dinner, Sally lights a cigarette, and says, "Ya know, Rebecca, I absolutely love your home. If I wasn't such a silly city bird I'd let Sea Gull talk me into moving to the country."

"I've asked her to move in with me several times," Sea Gull explains.

"I just can't bring myself to make a commitment," Sally confesses to Rebecca after dinner. They are in the kitchen doing the dishes. Raven and Sea Gull have gone flying. Doing somersaults down by the seashore they strive to out fly each other.

"I'm sure Sea Gull would make a fine husband," says Rebecca, as she washes another dirty dish, which she puts in the second sink for Sally to dry.

"Well, Rebecca, we weren't actually thinking of getting married. We're thinking about living together."

"As long as you're both happy," Rebecca replies.

Once Raven and Sea Gull return they all sit down to play a game of cards. But, half way

through their bridge game Sea Gull says, "Rebecca, you look very tired. I think we should go. Why didn't you tell us you laid eggs today? We could have come another time."

"I feel fine. I could stay up all night. I could fly to San Francisco, and I could dance until dawn," she informs Sea Gull, but she is staring at Raven, so that she might put an end to the worrying of both birds with one wisecrack.

"Just the same I think we should go," Sea Gull says and on their way out the door he says, "Congratulations, again."

"See ya soon," Sally says cheerfully.

"Did he say anything about living common law with Sally?" Rebecca questions Raven, as she empties the ashtray that is almost overflowing with Sally's cigarette butts.

"You don't approve?"

"She's not the right bird for him. Of course I could be wrong, and I hope I am, but..."

"I thought you liked her?"

"I do, very much. I just don't believe they belong together or that it's going to last and I'd hate for Sea Gull to get hurt."

"So would I," replies Raven, "but he's a big bird."

They take turns sitting on the eggs that night and then the following afternoon right after lunch Rebecca tells Raven that they are going over to Rabbit's house.

"I was planning on writing this afternoon," he protests.

"You'll have plenty of time to write tomorrow. It won't hurt you to take a break. Besides Ruth isn't feeling well and we haven't seen them for several weeks."

"What's the matter with her?" Raven asks disgruntled.

"Morning sickness, I would imagine."

"What else could it be?" Raven replies, for Ruth is always pregnant. He agrees to go with Rebecca, though, for there is a storm brewing and he doesn't want her walking alone through the woods in bad weather. He doesn't like her walking by herself in the woods no matter what the weather.

"Dress warmly, my dear," he tells her. "I dare say, the sky is a blanket of black clouds."

Rebecca wears a crocheted shawl that her grandmother gives her when she is a fledgling. Raven wears an overcoat and he is carrying the carrot stew that Rebecca cooks for the Rabbits whenever Ruth is feeling under the weather. They are ready to leave when Raven remembers the eggs. "Will they be all right?" he asks.

"Yes, Raven, they will be fine for a few hours. They're hardly ready to hatch yet and the house is nice and warm," she informs him gently, even though he is beginning to drive her crazy with his constant concern. Yet, she can't help thinking there is something very sweet in the way he is always worried about his offspring.

"I hope it doesn't rain before we get there," Raven remarks once they are on their way.

"I brought an umbrella just in case," Rebecca says. "It's in my bag."

The rain storm doesn't start until after they have arrived, but by the time they are ready to go home thunder and lightning are putting on a powerful performance in the Washington woods. Raven wonders if perhaps in some unexplainable way together the two forces of nature are competing to win an award? "You're welcome to spend the night?" says Ruth.

Rebecca considers it for a moment, but if they stay over night undoubtedly they will lie awake listening to Rabbit and Ruth make love on their box spring bed - since Ruth is feeling better, and since their lovemaking is louder than any thunderstorm, and since it seems they are

both insatiable, she is sure they will not skip a night, since they certainly didn't the last time Raven and Rebecca "spent the night."

Raven comes to her rescue by reminding her about "The eggs."

"Oh yes, the eggs. And besides, I brought an umbrella."

Raven tries to help Rabbit open the front door, but the wind, which is blowing abominably, prevents them from forcing it open more than a few inches. It is at this moment when Raven first suspects something is amiss, but he has no idea of what that something is, so with a great deal of determination the four of them finally manage to push the door open and for the time being Raven forgets all about his foreboding feeling. "Be careful," Rabbit wails into the wind, as he and his wife watch Raven and Rebecca disappear into the woods.

"Damn it," Rebecca curses. "The umbrella broke and you know what that means?"

"Bad luck," says Raven even though he is not superstitious. "Just leave it on the limb of that tree," he tells her. Then he puts his wing over her shoulder to protect her from the storm, for they are out in the open now. In a field not far from Raven Manor. A jagged bolt of lightening zigzags across the sky and when it strikes something solid there is an earsplitting explosion. Rebecca is so startled by the suddenness of the noise she jumps and yells, but even Raven standing by her side has a hard time hearing her thanks to the following thunder that drowns out her voice entirely.

"The lightening must have hit something," he shouts when quite suddenly the storm abruptly stops. Shortly afterwards, standing in the field, they are both surprised when sunshine and a rainbow both reveal themselves in that order. Both are a blessing, but they bewilder the birds. "How strange," says Raven, as he studies the sky for some hint as to how it happened?

They are almost at the edge of a ridge and from there they will have a clear view of Raven Manor. It seems Rebecca is right when she says she smells smoke, for nearly simultaneously Raven says, "I smell smoke... too. I dare say the forest is on fire."

Raven is incorrect, however, in his assumption, for it is not the forest that is engulfed in flames, as they will soon see for themselves upon reaching the ridge, it is Raven Manor.

Rebecca releases a shrill sounding scream, as she starts to run towards her burning abode. Raven takes off into the air (for it is faster to fly) the second he sees the billows of black smoke and the blazing fire.

"The eggs," Rebecca cries. "The eggs."

The heat from the fire on the first floor is intense, and Raven can see no safe way in. He flies to the second floor, but it is also on fire. He goes to the nursery room window and what he sees there sends him into a frenzy. The nest he built for his babies is burning. All, but one, of the eggs are broken and black. He pecks at the panes of glass, but they are too thick to break with his beak. He flies thirty or forty feet away to build up his speed. Then he heads straight for the window that is in his way.

Rebecca is horrified when she witnesses her husband (her hero) heading towards the window. She is sure he is going to break his neck, but the glass gives way with his weight and when she sees it shatter, she says, "Thank God."

From the ground Rebecca does not know the imminent danger that her husband is still in, for inside the nursery he does his best to dodge the flames which are darting out from every direction and several times his wings are singed. He has fallen onto the floor, which is ready to collapse, when the egg, that seems to have survived so far, starts rolling across the top of the table. It is almost at the table's edge. Raven beats his wings and he flies through at least four feet

of solid fire. He catches the egg just in time, for the table and everything else in the room crashes to the first floor. Holding onto the egg with his talons, he retreats out the window.

Rebecca is waiting for him in the yard below. She is standing by the bird bath. Her crying is as uncontrollable as the fire. "Here," he says sorrowfully, "I'm sorry, I could only save one of the eggs."

"Your book, Raven. What about your book? It will be burned," she continues to cry.

Again he takes off into the air. This time to the other side of the house. The study room window is open and for the time being the room is fire free. He swoops inside. He opens his desk drawer. He grabs hold of the manuscript, but instead of getting out of the over heated room, he hesitates. His mind is racing for something belonging that Rebecca might want? The only thing he can think of at the time is their wedding album, but it is in the basement. The picture of Puff pops into his mind. "It's too late," he tells himself and he is ready to leave the red-hot room when the fire finds its way in with a frightening force. The study room door is blown off its hinges and he is hurled against the wall. The room bursts into flame. Yet, he escapes without a second to spare through the window - minus the manuscript. His book is left behind to be incinerated with the rest of the room and all of Raven Manor.

Rebecca, who is holding onto the egg like it is her last link to life, sees Raven flying frantically towards her. He rushes right by her, however, and into the bird bath, for his tail feathers are on fire.

As Raven Manor burns to the ground there is nothing that they can do but huddle together and watch as their house goes up in smoke. For several hours afterwards Raven circles the surrounding area searching for the scoundrel who started the fire; and while Rebecca sobs the rubble, which is all that remains of Raven Manor smolders.

"Lightening," Rabbit says. "It must have been the storm that started it."

"We did hear a loud bang," Rebecca tearfully remembers.

"Maybe you left the stove on after you cooked the carrot stew?" Ruth suggests sounding rather unsympathetic, but both Raven and Rebecca are sure she said it with only the best intentions.

"Rabbit is right," Raven announces. "It was the storm, and it was Mother Nature who started it. I am sure that she is behind that lightening bolt. You can bet she did it because I disobeyed her banning of the book. She alone controls the weather. She is the culprit behind the crime. She is to blame for the death of our children. She is responsible for the ruin of Raven Manor."

"He's right," says Rebecca. "I remember how the storm stopped so suddenly."

Ruth tells them that they are welcome to stay for just as long as they like. "Maybe just for the night," says Raven, who is sitting next to Rabbit on a very uncomfortable couch. "Everything is gone," he adds. "Our babies. All of our belongings were burned. Our house. Even the picture we had of Puff has perished."

"No," Rebecca states while picking up the bag that she had brought with her earlier. She pulls out the silver framed photograph. "I brought it over before to show Rabbit and Ruth, but then I forgot."

"Thank goodness," Raven exclaims.

Rebecca passes the picture of Puff to Raven, via Ruth and Rabbit, and then she says, "Now, we had better build a bed for the egg."

"I wonder why it survived?" says Raven.

"It probably had a thicker shell. It was the last one I laid."

"Do you suppose it will be all right?" he asks his wife with so much worry that no one word could adequately describe the tone of his voice.

"It's hard to say. It's still alive."

"What about the book?" Rabbit asks with a raised eyebrow.

"It was burned," Rebecca says.

"How dreadful. Whatever will you do?" Ruth inquires of Raven.

"I suppose now there will be no book?" Rabbit says, and everyone is surprised by how sad he sounds, since he had never shown any interest before in Raven's writing.

"Mr. Whale has a copy," Raven informs his friends with a sigh of relief. "In fact, late last night after Sea Gull and Sally left, I gave him another chapter."

MONA (THE MURDERESS) IN MANHATTAN

Pandora's apartment was not the first place that Mona went, but it was one of the first places the police went looking.

"What the hell do you want?"

"We'd like to look around?"

"Do you have a search warrant?" Pandora asked the policemen.

"No, but we can get one quick enough."

She did not want to let them in, but she wanted them to come back even less, and since she had nothing to hide, she decidedly moved away from the door and allowed them to enter.

"We understand that Mona Babcock is a friend of yours? Have you heard from her?"

Pandora shook her head. "She wrote me a letter a while back, but other than that I haven't heard from her. She's in a hospital."

"This is her apartment?"

"Yes," Pandora replied.

"Could we see the letter?"

"I didn't keep it. I'm not sentimental, and she didn't have much to say."

They looked in the bedroom and in the kitchen and out on the fire escape. "Well, if she tries to contact you in any way call us immediately. If you don't, or if you help her in any way, you could be charged with harboring a fugitive."

"What's this all about?" Pandora asked angrily.

"You haven't heard?"

"Heard what?"

"Your friend has escaped."

And then the next night there was another knock. Pandora, who wasn't expecting anyone, did not open the door until after she asked, "Who is it?"

"It's me."

She recognized the whisper right away, but not the rest of her. Her short dark hair in

particular.

"I had no where else to go," Mona said.

Pandora pulled her into the apartment. She started to light a cigarette, but her hands were shaking, so she set it aside. "How did you get out? The police were here last night," she said nervously.

"You know, you shouldn't smoke," Mona remarked. "They're killers."

"Look who's talking," Pandora replied.

After checking up and down the hallway to make sure there wasn't a SWAT team in the stair well, or some detective lurking in the shadows, Pandora double locked the door with a dead bolt and lit her cigarette. "Now, how the hell did you get out?"

"I escaped."

"I didn't figure they let you go on their own. Do you know they're looking for you everywhere?"

"How are my plants?" Mona asked, as she moved towards the living room.

"MONA, YOU'RE BACK!" they all called when she came into the room.

"Has Pandora been taking good care of my babies?"

"So, so," several of them said.

"She's forever forgetting to water us," the cactus complained.

"She has a lot of wild parties," said the African violet.

"And she gets fucked a lot," the philodendron further informed her.

"Honey, did you hear what I said? They're looking everywhere for you."

"I didn't figure they would forget about me, but I must say it's exciting." Mona exclaimed sitting down on an overstuffed sofa. "I see you bought some furniture?"

"I'm not as noble as you. An ascetic lifestyle is not for me."

Mona swallowed the small amount of pride she had left and pleaded with Pandora. "Please, Pandora, can I stay for a couple of days? I'm desperate. I don't have anywhere else to go. You're the only friend I've got other than Ozone Layer and he's a little old to be playing cat and mouse with the cops."

"Of course," Pandora replied, "but you know if you get caught I could do time."

"I'll tell them I held you hostage."

"Just be careful," Pandora warned.

"I will be. I promise. I'm never going back to that place."

"By the way, what the hell happened to your hair?"

"Do you like it?"

"It will take some getting used to, and it needs to be trimmed."

"I did it myself."

"You look so different."

"That's the idea. Maybe later you could fix it for me?"

Pandora drew the blinds in the living room, just in case some cop was spying on them with binoculars from across the street, though she doubted it very much, because if they were being watched the police would be beating down the door by now.

"Are you hungry?"

"Starving," Mona said. "What do you have?"

"There are some sirloin steaks in the freezer."

Mona laughed despite her strong convictions, for Pandora's sense of humor had always

amused her. "Don't be vulgar," she retorted. "Don't you have anything that hasn't been born and died?"

"How 'bout some spaghetti?"

"Sounds wonderful."

"With meat balls?"

She laughed again and later even Pandora loosened up a little. The joint of marijuana she smoked, while waiting for the spaghetti to cook, helped her to relax. "Are you sure you don't want some?" she asked, as she extended her arm and the joint she was holding in her hand to Mona.

"No, I've been stoned on tranquilizers for five years. I've had enough drugs to last me several lifetimes. Besides under the circumstances I think I'd just become paranoid."

During dinner they talked about the success of the store. They gossiped about some of the residents of Raven Rock. Then Mona told her all about the shock treatments and her subsequent escape. She happened to mention how helpful Redblood and Mr. Badger had been, but Pandora had trouble believing she could communicate with a bird and a badger, so she stood up and took their plates into the kitchen. When she returned she had an extra key for the apartment in her possession, but before she gave it to Mona, she said, "For God's sake, if you have to go out, be careful."

"I will, don't worry. I plan on being very careful."

"What exactly are your plans?" Pandora inquired in the living room while lighting the remainder of the joint she smoked earlier. "I presume you have some?"

"Well, as soon as I can I'm going to New York. It's a big city to lose yourself in."

"How do you plan on getting there?" Pandora asked trying at the same time not to release the smoke in her lungs which she was not yet ready to relinquish.

"It might be too risky to take a plane. The police are probably staking out the airport, so I thought I might take a bus."

"Do you have any money? New York isn't cheap."

"Not much," Mona said. "I was hoping..."

"I've got some put away. I'll go to the bank tomorrow."

"Thanks Pandora. You're a true friend. I don't know what I'd do if you weren't here.?"

"You'd hide, which is what you're going to be doing for the rest of your life anyhow."

Pandora found no particular pleasure in pointing this out, but she felt that someone should and the sooner the better she believed.

"Well, I promise one day I'll pay you back," Mona said, for at the moment she didn't want to dwell on her future as a fugitive from the law.

"Forget it, girl, you gave me this apartment and the store which got me off the street. You can repay me by taking care of yourself and by staying out of trouble."

In the morning she was waiting outside the bank when it opened. She was all for giving Mona a helping hand, but on the other hand she wanted her to leave and in a hurry. It would only be a matter of time before the police tracked her down and arrested them both.

Alone in her apartment Mona took the opportunity to get in touch with what she and many others called her "higher self." She soaked in a hot tub. She lit several candles. She meditated. She talked with her plants. She stroked them. She watered them. She even sang to them.

Pandora came back at noon hour with the money, but she spent the rest of the day downstairs in the store so the police would not be suspicious should they be conducting some sort of surveillance.

That night Mona decided to leave. "There's no point in my sticking around here. The sooner I get out of Raven Rock the better for us both."

Pandora quickly agreed with her. She packed her a suitcase with some extra clothing, since they wore approximately the same size. She also gave her a prized pair of skin tight PVC pants.

"I don't wear leather," Mona objected vehemently.

"They're polyurethane plastic. It's the latest look. Put them on. In fact when I bought them I thought of you being that you're a vegetarian and all. Mind you I bought them only because I like them," she confessed and then she went to work on the rest of her. She restyled her hair and she altered her friends appearance as much as humanly possible with the tools that she had. Only a plastic surgeon with a scalpel at his disposal could have been more thorough.

"Pandora, wait, I don't want to look like a whore. I'll stand out too much."

"Trust me, they've never seen the way you looked when you worked the street. Therefore, they won't be on the lookout for a hooker."

"Maybe, but..."

Pandora proceeded to change the color of Mona's eyes with contact lenses. Instead of brown, they were bright blue now, and they were becoming with her black hair. She shaved her eyebrows off and then Pandora penciled a thin black line above each brow. Make up properly applied helped to change the whole shape of her face and Pandora was pleased with the final product. And Mona, she was sorry to say, actually looked a lot better in the PVC pants, which made Pandora a little less reluctant to part with them.

"Hurry up," Pandora said. "The last bus for New York is leaving in fifteen minutes."

After Mona had said a tearful good bye to her plants, and to Pandora, she climbed down the fire escape. She went around the back of the building and through the alley. The bus station was only a block away.

"A one way ticket to New York City, please."

"No problem whatsoever!" the picture postcard Mona mailed to Pandora's apartment said. She had made it clear across the country without being caught, though in Pandora's prized pair of PVC pants she had been propositioned several times; but the mayhem of midtown Manhattan, not male companionship, was foremost on Mona's mind, for she was in the midst of it now.

"Amen," Pandora said to herself, as she tore the postcard up into tiny pieces and flushed them down the toilet, so there would be no trace of her knowing Mona's whereabouts.

"O MAN," Mona said to her higher self. She had never been to New York before. She had certainly never been surrounded by so many, "INSECTS," she screamed, for the tall buildings reminded her of ant hills, and the hordes of human beings racing to and fro put into proper perspective looked like army ants running frantically around on the pavement. People in New York are accustomed to both crackpots and cockroaches, so no one paid any attention to the dark haired hooker in Times Square hollering about bugs.

Moving into the room that she rented with a portion of the money that Pandora had given her was the first of many ordeals she would have to endure in what she quickly came to refer to as "the big rotten apple." She started keeping a diary and in it she described in great detail: the derelicts, and the drugs, the addicts, and the drugs, the dealers, and the drugs, the danger, and the drugs, the decadence, and the drugs: on her doorstep, down the hall, all throughout the dirty dilapidated building where she resided.

She was fortunate enough to find a job through a temporary agency as a typist. On her application she put Pandora down as a reference, but as it turned out they did not even bother

checking her credentials.

"Well, we would have if we'd known she was the Manhattan murderess," they later said to the police.

At the time, however unfortunate for the whole of New York, the agency was impressed with her ability to type ninety words per minute, with her businesslike appearance, and with her uncanny knack for knowing exactly what to say during the interview. There were lots of plants at the agency, Mona wrote in her diary, as a clue to her insightful observations.

For the first few weeks they sent her on several short term assignments. Then they placed her in a low paying permanent position at a law firm on Wall Street.

Any money she had left over at the end of each week after paying her bills went on wigs, make up, and clothes that varied in style to such a degree that when the police looked in her closet they thought there were at least two women sharing the space. I like to dress up in disguises, she wrote in her diary. One night I'm a red head and the next a brunette, or a blond with short hair, or a blond with long hair, or a black haired beauty with or without bangs. In the evenings she often dressed as a prostitute, but she never turned any tricks. Wall Street was where she worked, so during the week days she not only dressed appropriately for her position she played the part to perfection.

She was only in New York for a month before the first murder. Unlike many women who find Manhattan the ideal place for a shopping spree Mona found it the perfect local for a killing spree. The carnage continued right where it had left off before her incarceration. Her first victim had been a publisher of pocket books whom she met at an office party. He refused to print his pocket books on recycled paper, so without further ado she pushed him down an empty elevator shaft. After that there was no stopping her. She killed nonstop and she would continue to kill, according to her diary, until mankind was no longer a threat to Mother Nature. I am determined to put an end to pollution. I am determined to protect the planet from people. If I have to rid the world of all the people who pollute one by one, I will. Last night I considered killing a drug dealer just down the street from where I live. Every night on my way home from work I see him selling crack to six and seven year old kids. In the end I decided not to, because even though dealers such as him are a group of degenerate people that I despise they will never make my hit list, as they are only harmful to themselves and to other human beings, which does not matter to me. I only want to stop the people hurting the earth and the helpless creatures that I have come to care so much about. Nevertheless if I ever see that drug dealer doing something destructive to Mother Nature I will not hesitate to annihilate him.

It was on her way home from work one night when she decided to try a different route so as to avoid the drug dealer in question, and in doing so she happened to pass a butcher shop. As she walked by she thought how much she liked the sound of "Mona Babcock's Butcher Shop." When she said it out loud it had a certain ring that appealed to her most sinister of senses. She pictured herself operating such a place. A huge butcher's block where she'd beat and pulverize people who pollute the planet. They would come in off the street voluntarily for her to question, and in most cases kill. At the foot of the butcher's block was where she envisioned her most prized possession - a glimmering razor sharp guillotine where those guilty of crimes against Mother Nature would get what they deserve.

She was several streets away from her room that same night when her attention was turned towards a truck that had stopped at the corner. The driver, a good looking lad in his late twenties with long scraggly hair, had the mannerisms (Mona believed) of a man who was probably hung

like a horse. He winked at Mona, but it wasn't the driver, his wink, or the probably size of his penis, that caught her eye, it was his exhaust pipe that belched out enough carbon dioxide (Mona was convinced) to kill a whole herd of cattle. She just happened to be waiting for the light to turn green when she found herself having to inhale, against her will, the thick blue smelly smoke. She fumed, for not only was he responsible for emitting toxins into the atmosphere, the truck was on delivery from the butcher shop she had just passed. Pissed off in a primeval way, she crossed the street as quickly as she could. She left long before the light turned green and allowed her to legally leave the curb. As soon as she reached the other side of the intersection she started to strut. She was wearing a short skirt and since she had regained all of the sex appeal that she had lost in, what she now regularly referred to as, "the loony bin" she was as stunning as ever. She stuck her thumb out when the truck approached and she caught the driver's eye with a wicked wink of her own.

"Hop in, hot stuff," he hollered, as he held up the rush hour traffic. Several cars behind him honked their horns having that he had stopped in the center of the road. "Where ya headed, honey?"

"Downtown, but I've got a better idea, let's take a drive through Central Park?"

"Are you working?"

"Your pleasure's the only payment I want, stud," Mona purred. Yeah, like a cat with it's claws out.

"Anything ya say, sexy," he said.

After they turned into the park Mona told him to pull over. "What do you have in back?" she asked.

"Animal parts," he replied, and those were the last words he would ever speak.

On many of her victims Mona used handcuffs that she had purchased in a novelty shop from a south Vietnamese vender. They were particularly helpful when she wanted to torture somebody before butchering that same somebody. She was able to cut off fingers, toes, or whatever part of the person she felt befitted the crime they had committed against her benefactor Mother Nature. Naturally, ninety five percent of the time the people passed out from the pain, or from fear, long before she even began to butcher them. She could clearly remember how in a rage she had cut off the genitals of one gentleman, because in passing she happened to spot him peeing on a bed of petunias. "And when I'm done," she seethed, "I'm going to drop your limp dick down your garbage disposal and grind..."

"Lady, for God's sake. It was late at night. No one, but you, saw me. What's the big deal?" He pleaded for Mona's mercy while helplessly handcuffed to one of the cabinets in his own kitchen. Of course Mona had seduced him on the sidewalk to gain access into his house, and had seduced him even further in order to fasten the handcuffs.

"That's not the point. You purposely peed on the plants. You could have aimed it towards the brick wall, but no you wanted to WATER THE PLANTS WITH YOUR MANLY PISS."

"I couldn't wait to get home. I was on my way back from a bar. For the love of God, lady, give me a break."

"You purposely peed on the plants," she repeated. "Did you think they were thirsty for your STINKING URINE?" she screamed, and when she moved towards his testicles with the carving knife he squirmed in terror. For a brief moment she hesitated. Perhaps, in this instance she was being unfair in her judgement? Maybe this man does not deserve to die for something so

incidental? I'm wearing a disguise, I could just leave, she thought to herself, and she was ready to let him live until she saw on the counter a plate that was piled high with some type of animal bones that had been gnawed on by the trembling meat eater. Laughing, she threw her head back and then she cut off the "carnivore's" cock and balls.

After she finished the job of making sure he was dead she said, to her self which was covered in blood, "This is ridiculous, I have to get a gun."

It was a semi-automatic handgun with a Smith & Wesson silencer that she paid three hundred dollars for in Harlem. She bought the bullets in a gun shop and then she went right back into the store and said, "You'd better give me another box."

Two weeks later the same overweight balding salesclerk, slightly suspicious at seeing her again so soon, said, "You sure must have done a lot of shooting?"

"I sure must have," Mona said to the man, but after that she started going to different stores to buy her ammunition. Sometimes she was able to buy bullets from twelve and thirteen year old boys in the Bronx and Brooklyn, and from the "heavies" in Harlem. After killing a countless number of people she threw the gun into the East River. It was still smoking, in fact, when it hit the water, for she had just finished killing a baker for using animal fat in his cookies. "It makes the cookies crispier," he had cried.

"I don't care if it turns them into gold," Mona snapped and then she pulled the trigger and shot him several times.

She bought another gun of a slightly larger caliber and a new pair of gloves. This time she was being very careful not to let herself get caught. The mere idea of being convicted in a court of law, of being labelled a lunatic, of being brought before a judge and a jury, of being behind bars, made her cringe. It sickened her to think that they could send her away to another asylum or somehow sentence her to death.

Holding onto her hat, as she strolled through Central Park, one windy afternoon she stopped to sit down on a bench where someone had left the New York Times. On the front page there was a picture of the President of the United States. Only moments ago she had passed a poster of the Mayor of New York City. "Politicians," she started to say.

"Are the epitome of the power hungry human being," someone else said.

Startled, Mona spun around to see a man with his pet poodle standing behind her. He seemed harmless enough, so she smiled and said, "They all better start doing something constructive about the preservation of this planet or else..."

"Of else what?" the man asked when Mona failed to finish what she was saying.

"Or else the planet and every person on it is going to perish," she stated.

"You know, you are absolutely right," the man informed her with a whimsical wave of his hand. He sat down on the bench beside her. "My greatest concern and my deepest fear is the mess that mankind has made and is continuing to make. I mean even if we get a grip on global warming, acid rain, automobile pollution, the clear cutting of the rain forests, and all our other environmental concerns, we will always have enough nuclear warheads in the world to blow us all to smithereens in a matter of seconds."

Before he left he gave her the name and number of an environmental organization. "We're always in need of concerned citizens like yourself," he said.

"Have a nice day," said Mona.

"Come along, Fido."

That same afternoon she went to the Bronx zoo, because she could not bare the thought of

returning to her room right away. Upon first arriving in New York she had seen a Bronx zoo brochure at the bus station and she had been meaning to go to the zoo ever since just to see how bad the place was. After wandering around for an hour she came to the conclusion that even though the animals were well cared for it was a terrible, terrible place. In her opinion the place was no better than a prison and what was more appalling to her was that the prisoners had never committed any crime. Already, she had her eye on several of the zoo keepers. "Animals should not be kept in cages for the amusement of mankind," she growled at the girl selling popcorn and peanuts and cotton candy. "Listen, lady, I just work here," the girl said.

One hour later Mona was arrested for patting a polar bear. She climbed over a fence and a wall and was found with her arms wrapped around the bear's neck. "I swear to God the woman was hugging him," one of the zoo keepers said.

"Old Goliath is the biggest and the meanest bear we've got. No one can get near him?" the girl selling the popcorn and the peanuts for an outrageous price replied.

"The bear is unhappy," Mona told the judge, who fined her, but he released her right after, for he had no way of knowing the true identity of the dark haired young woman standing before him in his courtroom. She used the same alias she used at her work on Wall Street. Jane Forrester, she called herself.

The following Sunday she returned to Central Park. It was one of the few places in the city where she could commune with nature. It was a sunny day and she was wearing a pair of sunglasses that had the highest UV protection possible. It wasn't windy, like it was the week before, so she didn't need to hold onto her hat, as she strolled through the park in search of somewhere to sit in solitude. As it turned out she chose the same park bench as before where she began reading the magazine she had bought. Munching on some walnuts imported from Brazil she read an article about one of the richest men in America, which made her incredibly angry. "The moron," she said to herself. "He could purchase the Antarctica and turn it into a World Park. He could build a sanctuary to save all the endangered species. He could buy hundreds of thousands of acres of rainforest in Brazil. He could buy the fucking ozone layer and he could cover the hole with hundred dollar bills. The bastard. The billionaire. A hummingbird has a bigger brain. A snake in the grass has got more sense. A blood sucking leech has a larger heart. You hedonist. You hog."

"There is injustice everywhere," said a tree not too far from where she was sitting. At first Mona thought it was the man with the poodle, until she realized the voice was not coming from outside her head, but was entirely internal. When she communicated with trees or plants or animals they never actually opened their mouths or their petals or their leaves and spoke. It was always purely a telepathic experience.

"Trust me, I know what I'm talking about," the tree continued. "I'm two hundred and fifty years old today. At the base of my trunk alone there have been more muggings, rapes, and murders than I care to remember."

Looking up at the tree through her thick sunglasses Mona smirked and said, "Money may not grow on trees, but that is where it comes from."

She wondered, as she wandered further into the park how she could get close enough to that bastard billionaire? Close enough to kill that is. Surely, he would be surrounded by scores of security guards? After stopping and reading the rest of the article she found her first lead. It told her the hotel where the man lived in Manhattan. Tonight, she would wear a short skirt, fishnet stockings, and she would stalk the place.

She realized after she left the lobby of the plush hotel that she did not stand a chance. She did manage to see the man in the midst of many others. "HEY, MISTER MULTIMILLIONAIRE," she'd hollered, and everyone's attention was turned her way, security guards included. "MOTHER NATURE WANTS HER MONEY BACK!"

Having failed miserably she splurged by taking a taxi straight home. She went right to bed without even saying good night to the cockroaches, who were her only companions in the rundown rooming house.

In the morning when she awoke feeling frustrated she noticed the number the man with the poodle in Central Park had given her. She called the place from a pay phone on her way to work and set up an appointment for that evening. Their office was not far from Wall Street, so she after work she was able to walk. She joined it and several other organizations over a short period of time and she was delighted to find her favorite: Save The Planet from Destruction, had moved its headquarters from Los Angeles to midtown Manhattan. The organizations were all equally impressed with her zeal, her passion for hard work, and her willingness to do even the most menial tasks. "She was one of our very best and most dedicated volunteers," they told the police.

She canvassed from door to door for one organization or another asking for charitable donations. Whomever made the mistake of slamming their door in her face she would go back whenever she could, or whenever she thought it was safe to do so, and she would kill them. Once the impolite person made her so mad she rang the doorbell again. The woman returned right away. Mona, who had pulled her pistol out of her purse, shot the woman in her first furious and then flabbergasted and then finally frightened face. It had been during the day in a residential district, but nobody in the neighborhood heard the shot like they should have since Mona had not wasted time by putting the silencer onto the gun, and nobody saw the assailant, or so they said.

That wasn't the only time that Mona murdered in broad daylight. On Broadway Avenue at noon hour she shot a woman wearing a full length mink coat three times in the back. Then in the midst of all the confusion she ran to the other side of the street and jumped into a cab. It was not her first victim in fur either, not by far. There was "the slut" in the sable. The man in the muskrat. The raccoon. The wolf. The rabbit. The fat lady in the fox fur. Though she could only remember them all if she referred to her diary.

The Manhattan Police Department knew the killer they were desperately looking for was a woman. Eyewitnesses on several of the hideous homicides reported seeing Mona in more than one mode:

"She looked like a hooker."

"She had red hair."

"She had long black hair."

"She was definitely a blond."

"She was wearing dark sunglasses and a hat. I couldn't see her face."

"She had brown eyes."

"She had blue eyes."

"Her eyes were green."

"I'm not sure, it could have been a man dressed as a woman?"

"She looked like a successful business woman. She was wearing a pin striped suit tailored with a tie."

"She had green hair. It might have been a wig. She looked like one of those punk rockers."

The police were even more baffled by her behavior and by the apparent absence of any motive for the multitude of murders. The victims weren't all blond women, or black men, or bald men, or men with mustaches, or old ladies. There was never any money or jewelry taken. The only thing they knew for sure was the person committing the homicides was ruthless and relentless. Detective Helman, the man assigned to the case, had a prodigious pile of paper work on his desk that could prove just how prolific this person was. Helman also had a hunch as to the woman's identity, but he had no evidence to back it up. And even more frightening was the fact that he never had any way of knowing who would be her next victim?

Mona met the man in a bar on Madison Avenue. He was a big game hunter that grabbed her goat, her ass, and one of her tits all at approximately the same time. She agreed to go back to his place, though she was not pleased that he lived so far from her room and in the opposite direction, for right after she killed him she would have to take a taxi home.

"...and this, my little chickadee, is my den."

"And does this conclude the grand tour?" Mona asked.

He leered at her, like he had been doing for most of the evening, and said, "You haven't seen the bedroom yet."

"In a minute," Mona replied. She was looking at the moose's head the man had mounted on his wall. It was, however, just one of the many stuffed animals he had on display. She stared at it for a long time. "Did you do that?" she asked with her temper ticking away like a time bomb about to explode.

"You mean stuff it?"

"KILL IT?" she finally exploded, for she could no longer control her rage.

"I sure did. I've hunted big game all over the world. I told you that in the bar. It doesn't bother you, does it? You said it turned you on? You're not one of those piss ass pacifists who believe that animals have rights?" he laughed.

"No, I'm not a pacifist," she said, and she said it without showing the slightest amount of emotion. "How tall are you?" she asked with the same apathetic tone of voice, even though she was extremely eager to ask him how he would like to have HIS HEAD HUNG UP ON THE WALL LIKE A TROPHY?

"I'm six foot four and I'm all yours, baby. Every last lovable inch," he said.

"So, you've killed animals all over the world, have you?" she asked and again there was nothing revealing in the tone of her voice.

"Sure have. The Amazon jungle is my favorite stomping ground. I've killed tigers, elephants, rhinos... You name it I've killed it. I shot a charging lion with a bow and arrow in Africa on my last safari. Would you like to see her skin?"

"Maybe later," Mona replied stiffly, as she stared at one stuffed corpse after another.

"When I was a boy Hemingway was my hero, not because of the books he wrote, but because he was a big game hunter."

"Huh, huh," Mona said. She wanted to say that Hemingway was a hack, but she had never read any of his novels, so instead, she said, "Hemingway is in hell, and Moby Dick," which she had read, "is disgusting." She turned her attention towards the stuffed kodiak brown bear that was in the far corner of the room. "The biggest in the world," the hunter informed her. The bear was in an upright position reared on its hind legs, and as Mona stared into the bear's large lifeless glass eyes they stared into space. "I think I'm going to be sick," she said.

"Too much to drink, hey?" the big game hunter asked as he led her away from the bear and she allowed him to slowly take her into the bedroom. The leopard skin bedspread jumped out at her the moment she entered the room. So did the snake skin cowboy boots the man removed from his feet. The silk shirt he unbuttoned. The alligator belt he had wrapped around his waist, and his wallet were just some of the other things she noticed. She sat down in a teak tree chair and she wondered which forest the wood came from? As she placed her cloth purse on her lap she said, "Why don't you take off all your clothes and get comfortable?"

"Sure thing, sweetie. Whatever you say. Did I mention how sexy you are?"

Mona spotted the Polaroid camera on his night table right next to his Rolex wrist watch. "Do you have any film for that camera?" she inquired.

"Why? You wanna take some dirty pictures?"

"I'd like one of you and the bear," she teased.

Naked, now, he got up and padded across the thickly carpeted floor. Mona, fully dressed, following him into the living room. She carried the camera and her purse. "By the way, before we begin, did you know that in order to make the material for the shirt you were wearing they boil the silk worms alive?"

He shook his head. He was a few feet away from the bear. "No, that's news to me."

Mona smiled. "Well, now you know. Stand in front of the bear," she demanded domineeringly. She had turned enough tricks in her time to know that what he wanted was a woman who would give him a good spanking. She knew the sense of power he gets when he hunts down defenseless animals was compensation for his passive behavior in bed. Without a gun he is as impotent as a newborn baby in diapers. The whip on the walls he kept looking at sheepishly was another sure sign of his submissive nature, she believed. In all likelihood, she thought, he has some deep rooted desire to be dominated that dates back to the last time he sat on his mother's lap.

"Like this?" he asked, as he posed for the picture, not unlike a little boy looking for his mother's approval.

"Yes, but mommy wants you to get it hard."

"She does? Well, mommy may have to help?" he said with a boyish grin and then he groped his own groin.

Mona set her purse and the camera down on the carpet. As she slowly moved towards him her eyes on his never moved. Like the bear with the lifeless eyes she did not blink. It was her will not to look away. When she was less than a foot from the big game hunter she got down on her knees. Kneeling before him she put his limp organ into her mouth and she sucked on it until it was hard and erect. Then she retreated quickly claiming she wanted to snap a picture. "We're going to call this shot 'The Stiff,'" she said, as she stooped over, her back to him and the bear. Having the gun in her hand she aimed it in her mind before she turned around and fired five very accurate shots. She saved the last bullet for what she called "a close up shot" of his erection, but it was no longer an easy target, (since it was no longer standing at attention) so she blew his balls off instead and was satisfied just the same. She put on a pair of rubber gloves and then after she had propped his dead body up beside the big brown bear she snapped a picture. When it was done developing she wiped the camera clean and then on the white rim around the outer edge of the photograph she carefully inscribed the following: MAN, 64".

Evidently, it was her first fatal mistake, for it did not take the police long to run a check on the handwriting to prove that this person was the same person who wrote the note in Raven

Rock that said: SOCIETY SUCKS! PEOPLE WHO POLLUTE WILL PAY THE PIPER!

Detective Helman had suspected for some time that it was Mona Babcock, but until now he did not have one shred of solid evidence to support his suspicions.

"We've got our killer," detective Helman said to the chief of police.

"Is she behind bars?"

"Not yet, but..."

"Then we don't have her, do we?"

"No, but we know for sure it's the same woman who killed those people in Washington State. She escaped last year from an insane asylum in Montana. Mona Babcock's our killer."

The chief of police, like the FBI, and the Mayor of New York, wondered how one woman could be responsible for the wave of murders that had plagued the people of Manhattan over the past few months. "Is it possible for one woman to have committed all these crimes?" he asked detective Helman.

"You know, sir, my instincts tell me it's not only possible, it's probable. Raven Rock is sending their police report, and the mental institution where she stayed in Montana is sending her psychiatric evaluation in the morning. We'll know better then."

Dr. Fleshman, who had nothing better to do, was eager to send the hospital's evaluation on his brand new fax machine: It's a commonly held belief that most mass murderers on a subconscious level want to get caught, but in the case of Mona Babcock I do not believe this theory can apply. To answer your question about Miss Babcock being a random killer the answer is no. Though her motives for killing are complex and may be considered foolish to us, she does kill for very definite reasons. And yes I fully believe that she is capable of having committed the number of homicides that have occurred in your city. She is extremely clever and furthermore I believe she is taking every precaution not to be apprehended. She has already been behind bars and based on her behavior at our hospital I would have to say that she would do everything within her power not to return. Yes, in my professional opinion she has a psychopathic personality. She is convinced she can communicate with plants and animals. She is a dangerous, dangerous woman and I only pray that you learn of her whereabouts as quickly as possible. Myself I would be very interested in learning, once she is in custody, how she managed to dig such a huge hole under our fence?

Detective Helman was reading some of the transcripts from the trial to see if there was any clue as to her whereabouts when one passage in particular caught his attention. "And what did the other plant tell you, Miss Babcock?" her defense attorney had asked. "It said the prosecutor read off the list of names of the men that I murdered..." Is it possible, detective Helman wondered just as the chief of police barged into his office and announced:

"She's committed another murder."

"When?"

"Sometime last night. His mother found his body in their backyard. He was nine years old."

"I'll get right on it."

"I want this woman found."

"Yes, sir, I'll inform the FBI that there's been another killing," detective Helman stated, for the FBI had been called in several months ago to help solve the case the moment the New York police department realized they were dealing with a serial killer and not a series of individual homicides.

An all point bulletin was put out for Mona. Network news stations all across the country ran

the most recent picture they had in their possession, while at the same time film footage of Mona taken six years ago in a straight jacket being shipped off to the asylum was shown. A edited clip of the killing of Nurse Nightmare was also broadcast. The Mayor of New York himself went on television to make a plea to the people of the city. "If anyone has any information as to the whereabouts of this woman whom is believed to be living in the Manhattan area, contact your local police department or the FBI. Do not try to apprehend. The suspect is armed and extremely dangerous."

Mr. Bear and Bachelor Buck are having one of their infamous fights. They are quarreling over who will have Raven and Rebecca as house guests.

"I want them to stay with me."

"I want them to stay with me."

"Well, my house is bigger," says Bachelor Buck.

"Well, my house is better," growls Mr. Bear.

"Only from your prosaic point of view," argues Bachelor Buck.

"Why don't we let Raven and Rebecca decide?" says Mr. Bear, and he is the first one of the two to say something sensible.

Mr. Wolf also wants to help. "If there is anything that I can do, don't hesitate to call on me," he tells them.

Mr. Otter claims he is going to visit his sister for two weeks and they can have his entire home all to themselves.

Mr. Beaver insists they stay with him. "I have several spare rooms in my lodge."

Raven thanks them all, but he says, much to Rebecca's surprise, that they will be staying at a hotel in Raven Rock. "Just until we finish building Raven Manor, bigger and better than before," he assures her.

His writing is the reason that Raven wants to stay in Raven Rock. He thinks it will be a more inspiring place for him to complete his next chapter. And if Mother Nature starts another fire, like he suspects she might, does he want to endanger the lives of his friends? No, he does not. "So, you see," he says to Rebecca, "not only was she unsuccessful in destroying the book she has given us the freedom to go forth and find adventure."

"And we can go shopping," Sally says. "Sea Gull is staying at my place, so the four of us can go to the movies. We can go out for dinner. We can go dancing. It will be divine."

Rebecca backs away from them both. She believes her husband's head is on backwards from going through the window the way he did. And since Sally seems to be on his side she has her doubts about the dining and the dancing as well. She would definitely not go if she knew

Raven's real destination is none other than New York City. But, at the time, Raven does not even know about his "need" for New York.

Right before Rebecca agrees to stay in town Raven notices the way that she is holding onto their egg. He holds his breath and says a short prayer, for he believes that Rebecca is about to blackmail him. "If you don't drop this dumb idea about going to Raven Rock I will drop this egg," he can hear her say, but of course she says no such thing. "And I'm sure she never would," Sea Gull says.

"You're right, but you didn't see the loathsome look she gave me right before she agreed to go."

In one crowded corner of their hotel room in Raven Rock there is a small kitchenette where Rebecca spends her spare time cooking. Raven rents a typewriter from a dealer in town and he spends the whole of his time working on the novel. Time spent sitting on the egg is something they share; and a fireproof nest (made from asbestos) is a safeguard they feel justified in having built.

"Shouldn't the beavers have started rebuilding Raven Manor by now?" Rebecca asks him one day when she realizes that nothing is being done.

"Don't you like it here?" he asks.

"I'm not concerned about myself. I'm worried about our baby. He or she needs a home to grow up in not a hotel room."

"I'm working on it, my dear. I dare say, I'm working on it. Don't you worry about a thing," he tells her.

In reality, however, Raven Manor will never be rebuilt, because behind Rebecca's back Raven and a real estate agent are making all the necessary arrangements for "a nice little nest in New York." When it's time to tell Rebecca he butters her up by buying her a very expensive broach. But, even after giving her a gift he still can't decide on the best way to break the news. "We're moving, ladybird, so march in there and pack your bags or I'll peck the living daylights out of you. My love, will you move with me to the city? Rebecca, you know I adore you more than life itself, but darling, dearest, decision-maker, my doctor told me I'll die if I don't move to the city..."

"To the city?" Rebecca cries. "I hate Seattle. I told you I flew over it once and it was the worst experience of my life."

"No not Seattle," Raven says and then he stands up just in case he has to fly away from the fury he knows is forthcoming.

"What city?"

"New York," he says.

"New York City? Never," she replies. "Not in a million years. Not in a billion years. Not as long as there is a feather on my back and a breath of life left in me. No. No. No. No."

"Sea Gull and Sally think that it's a wonderful idea."

"Sea Gull and Sally can go screw themselves," she says.

Raven is not sure what to say. Lately, his wife has been using words he wasn't aware were part of her vocabulary. Perhaps, she picks them up from reading his book? He is always reluctant to let Rebecca read some of the risqué things he writes, but he supposes he shouldn't worry, because the other day she informs him that so far her favorite line in the novel is when Mona tells the warden to get his "filthy fucking face" out from between her legs right after she orders him to put it there.

"What if we just go for a while?"

"What if we don't go at all?"

"We don't have to stay," he offers.

"We don't have to stay married either," she retorts.

"But, Rebecca, you've never been?"

"I've never been divorced either."

Raven is taken aback. He had no idea that she could be such a brutal bitch. What else don't I know about my beloved, he wonders.

"If you give the place a chance just maybe you'll like it? What do you say?"

"I say we'll be the only ravens in the entire city. We'll stick out like a pair of penguins in the Florida Keys. And what about all those horrible, hateful human beings? How many humans did Mona say there are living in Manhattan? Was it one and a half million?"

"How do you know humans are hateful? Leonardo is the only man you've ever met?"

"That's right and he ran right into Ruth and I when we were out for a walk. If you ask me it's weird the way he lives all alone in the woods away from his own kind."

"He's a monk."

"That may be, but he's a man and in case you've forgotten it was a man who killed your mother."

"I haven't forgotten, but..."

"And what about our baby? Do you want him or her to grow up in a dirty city? I know I don't."

"Culture, my dear, culture," Raven replies.

"Hogwash, my dear, hogwash," Rebecca reiterates.

"I want my child to go to college," he claims.

"Well, I would like our child to be a normal bird."

Raven's feelings are hurt. He always prides himself on being above the norm. What with his reading, and writing, and his devotion to all that he holds dear, does Rebecca consider him abnormal? No, she does not.

"You're the best bird in the whole world," she says, and he thinks her mild manner means she has changed her mind, but in a moment he realizes his mistake. She tells him to go take a flying leap in the ocean, so he tries another approach. He tries to impress upon her the importance of the book. A subject of discourse he has avoided up until now. "The survival of the planet may depend upon my completing it. Our baby may not have air to breathe or water to drink if I don't?" he tells her.

Softly, she says to her husband, "No matter how good your book is, Raven, it is not going to change the world one way or another. The world will evolve at its own pace with the passing of time."

"Maybe you're right," he replies. "Even the mightiest of men can not change the world unless providence permits, but my intuition tells me moving to New York is an act of fate that I am forced to follow. Mother Nature may have burned our home, but I believe her desire to do so was fueled by fate's eternal flame."

"That's fine if you believe in fate. Unfortunately for you, I don't. I'm agnostic."

Something else I didn't know, Raven, the romantic, thinks to himself about Rebecca, the disbeliever. "Well, all I know for sure, my dear, is that I have an insatiable need to go to New York. New York is calling me back. Quork. Quork. Quork. Can't you hear the call?" he cries.

"GO QUORK YOURSELF," Rebecca shouts with a passion that she has never been known to display. "Well, I have never been put into such a position," she offers as an explanation at a later date.

Right now, however, Raven is stunned into submission. He'll live wherever Rebecca wants. He sits down on a chair in the corner of their hotel room. It isn't that he is offended by her outburst. He just didn't realize (until now) how deeply his dream to move to the city is upsetting her. "Damn my dream," he says to himself, and he decides then that he will keep his promise to rebuild Raven Manor. If necessary he will even stop writing the book in order to get Mother Nature off his back. If writing the book is going to bring him and Rebecca nothing but bad luck, or break up their marriage, he will burn the bloody thing himself. He loves Rebecca much more than the words he puts on paper, so if she feels that strongly about moving to the city then he will certainly succumb to her wish to rebuild Raven Manor, and moreover he will make amends with Mother Nature. His mind is made up.

Rebecca, on the other hand, after telling her husband where to go has gone herself into the bathroom. Staring at the broach that he bought her, which she now knows was a bribe, she starts to think more rationally that perhaps New York won't be such a nightmare after all. And if moving there will make her husband happy, help him with the career that he cares so much about, bring them closer together, or simply shut him up, then surely she can find it within herself to make the sacrifice. She realizes his writing is very important to him. Why some days he can be down right fanatical about the book. "I have a headache that won't go away," he tells her on one of those days.

"It might help if you stop working?" she suggests. "Take a break. The book isn't going to go away, but your headache might?"

"I have to finish it," Raven replies. "I have to finish it. I don't care if my head falls off. The world is waiting and it may already be too late."

Well, his head doesn't fall off, and the world hasn't ended yet, but a few hours later she found him sound asleep with his head on top of the typewriter.

She steps into the shower and she sings to herself while she tries to make up her mind about moving to New York. "Should I say yes? Or should I say no? Should I stay here? Or should I go?" The next song that she starts singing is one that was written by Carol King, though it was Barbra Streisand that Rebecca heard sing the song several times on the radio. Rebecca, however, because she is a bird, is obliged to alter the lyrics slightly to suit her species.

"Wanting you the way I do
I only want to be with you
And I would go to the ends of the earth
Cause, Raven, to me that's what you're worth
Where you lead, I will follow
Anywhere that you tell me to
If you need, need me to be with you
I will follow, where you lead
I always wanted a real home with flowers on the
window sill
But if you want to live in New York City, Raven, you
know I will
I never thought I could get satisfaction from just

one bird
But if any bird can keep me happy, you're the bird
who can
And where you lead, I will follow
Anywhere that you tell me to
If you need, need me to be with you
I will follow, where you lead."

She is drying off her feathers when Raven bursts into the bathroom. He pecks away at her passionately. He tells her what a good sport she is. He mentions he loves her more than life itself. He also tells her she has a lovely singing voice. For sure she is not a songbird like Barbra Streisand, but just the same she is soulful.

They don't have a lot of luggage when they leave, for all of their belongings were burned in the fire. The only excess baggage they have to bring along are all the tearful good-byes and these they carry with them all the way. They promise their assortment of friends that one day they will return to Raven Rock. And meanwhile they promise to stay in touch. They promise to take care of themselves, and they promise to send several signed copies of the book when it is done.

Raven is sure they will not be coming back, so he makes Sea Gull promise to visit. "Of course, just tell me when," Sea Gull says.

He takes a trip to the ocean where he says farewell to Mr. Whale and then later he tells Rebecca. "I think that was the hardest good-bye. I believe I shall miss Mr. Whale the most."

"Me too, me too," Rebecca says with tears in her eyes.

Rabbit and Ruth toss them a going away party and with such an array of animals present someone says, "You would think we were on Noah's ark there's such an menagerie of animals here."

"A toast to Raven and Rebecca," someone else suggests.

"To two of the bravest birds in the world," says Mr. Owl.

"May all of your days be divine," says Sally.

"May you remain happily married forever," says Mrs. Skunk, who is a recent divorcee.

"May Mother Nature never darken your doorstep again," says Mr. Wolf.

"May hope and happiness fill your hearts," says Bachelor Buck.

"Best of luck," says Mr. Bear.

"It won't be the same around here without Raven and Rebecca," says everyone of them.

"I'm going to miss you," Ruth tells Rebecca.

"Me too, me too," Rebecca cries.

Rebecca is sick on the plane, and she says, "We should have flown." She is sick at the airport in New York, and she says, "We shouldn't have come." She is sick in the taxi that takes them to their apartment building, and she says, "I am going to be sick again." And sure enough she is sick on the sidewalk. Then she is sick in the elevator that lifts them up to their condominium on the forty fourth floor.

"Can we afford this place?" she asks when she comes out of their bathroom looking peaked and (if at all possible) pale.

"It's all been paid for with Puff's money," Raven informs her. "Why don't you lie down until your stomach settles?" He suggests and he is feeling rather ill himself, for he thinks: My God, what have I done to my dearest?

"After I look around," Rebecca replies.

He shows her the view from their balcony. "Isn't it breathtaking? That's the Hudson River below."

"But, it's brown," she cries and then over the balcony she barfs one last time.

They go back inside their apartment. Raven leads her through their luxurious living room and into their colossal kitchen. "And, for my wonderfully supportive wife we have an electric stove, and a refrigerator with a freezer that defrosts itself. We also have central air conditioning, an intercom in every room, cable TV, and a touchtone telephone."

"A telephone? Who am I going to call? No one I know has a phone," she complains.

"You'll make new friends here in New York," he assures her.

"And what are these contraptions?"

Raven laughs. "That's a microwave."

"A what?"

"It's an oven for cooking food fast. And this, my dear, is a dishwasher. When you do the dishes you won't have to get your wings wet ever again."

Later in the laundry room it takes them both a tremendous amount of time to figure out what are a washer and a dryer. "I dare say, my dear, these contraptions will clean our clothes."

Rebecca is wild with worry. She is wondering what ever happened to the bird who didn't believe (when he built Raven Manor) in the luxury of lights or in any machinery made by man? Why he was even averse to put in plumbing and their first year at Raven Manor they had lived by candlelight alone. Now, they have an air conditioner that (according to his book) creates chloroflurocarbons, which of course destroy the ozone layer.

"Well, no matter how hot it gets we won't turn it on," he promises. "But, look, we've got a stereo with speakers so powerful they would make Puff proud."

Rebecca does not like rock music, so Raven puts on some Mozart before he leads her into their lavish bedroom. She is even more bewildered by what she believes to be "a big, bubbling, bird bath" until he tells her, "It's a hot tub."

REDBLOOD (THE RAVEN) RETURNS

It took Redblood several days and a great deal of determination to reach his destination; and since seeing a raven in New York City is unheard of he caused quite a commotion. The superstitious, the misinformed, and the unenlightened, all believed that the big black bird was either an omen of some kind, an overgrown crow, or an easy target; and the rocks that they all threw at Redblood were almost enough to make him forget his reason for coming was to save mankind.

He had gone to New York to find Mona, but he was confused by the maze of buildings that make up the metropolis. They all looked identical to him, so he relied upon his instinctive nature to guide him to Wall street, which is where he found Mona working on the fifteenth floor of a glass office tower.

"Holy cow!" one of the secretaries exclaimed when she saw the bird sitting on the ledge just outside the window of the skyscraper.

Mona was typing out a report for her boss at the time. She had her back to the window and

obviously to the bird. "What is it?" she asked.

When the secretary pointed towards the window Mona turned around, and seeing Redblood she quickly excused herself by saying she had to go to the washroom. She took the express elevator down to the lobby.

Redblood was waiting for her on a lamp post a half a block away. Trying to look inconspicuous to the people passing by Mona sat down at a deserted bus stop. "Redblood, what are you doing here?"

"You have to hurry," Redblood said. "Hitler's here. He's built a bomb. Built a bomb. You have to hurry. Hitler's here. He's here. He's built a bomb. A big bomb. A bomb big enough to blow up the entire world. Blow up the world. Blow up the world."

"Redblood, calm down. You're not making sense."

"Hitler has built a bomb and you have to stop him before it's too late. Hurry."

"Who are you talking about?"

"Hitler. Adolf Hitler. He's built a bomb..."

"But, Redblood, Adolf Hitler is dead?"

"No, Hitler's here. You have to help. Hitler's here. Hurry, he's built a bomb."

"He died in 1945 at the end of World War II. He shot himself and..."

"No, not him. It's another Hitler. Another Hitler," Redblood told her hurriedly.

"Where, Redblood, where?"

"I'm not sure, but everyone in the forest is talking about it. In Raven Rock. Somewhere in the woods. In Washington State. On a mountain. You have to come back. You have to come back to Raven Rock. You have to hurry. Hitler's here. Quork. Quork. Quork."

"But, I can't go back to Raven Rock. The police and the FBI are looking for me. They'll arrest me and I'll go back to prison, and..." *

"Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God?"

"I do, I do, I do," Mona swore over and over and over again.

"Mame, how many murders have you committed?"

"Well, taking into account that I seem to murder the most during my menstrual flow, give and take those days when I had the flu, or a cold, or I just wasn't feeling well, or when the weather was bad..."

Almost seven years ago on trial Mona had made a mental, and a rather rough calculation, of how many tricks she had turned in Los Angeles. Now, standing trial once again for what the prosecutor called, "some of the most hideous murders ever committed since the dawning of civilization," Mona made another calculation for the court. How many times had she killed in cold blood? She wrote in the air, like she had before, on an imaginary piece of paper.

"Approximately six hundred," she said, and then standing up in the witness box she screamed, "HOW MANY MURDERERS ARE LEFT IN MANHATTAN? ONE AND A HALF MILLION MINUS SIX HUNDRED."

It was an open courtroom. There were reporters present and people from all across the country came to see for themselves the woman the press named "the Manhattan Murderess." This time the judge and the jury sentenced her to death. Upon hearing their verdict, however, Mona woke up screaming, sitting in what she thought for several spine tingling seconds was an electric chair, but no, it was an economy class seat on an airplane. Because of Redblood's urgent request she was returning to the town of Raven Rock. A cold sweat covered most of her body and she had trouble catching her breath. The stewardess, who had served Mona a cup of herbal

tea an hour ago, came rushing down the aisle. The stewardess, and just about every passenger on the plane, had heard Mona holler. "Miss, are you all right?" she asked the woman with the curly red hair who during most of the flight was covering her face with a handkerchief.

"I'm just a little jittery," Mona replied from behind the red kerchief.

After arriving safely in the city of Seattle she had to wait for two hours for a tourist flight that would take her to her hometown. But upon boarding the small commuter plane she became very apprehensive, for in less than thirty minutes she would be back in Raven Rock. Since she had never seen Raven Rock from the air before she strained to look out of her window. It appeared very picturesque, but after her being in New York for a year and their being so high above the ground it also appeared pint sized. As they descended down over the town, however, the houses, the hotels, the cars, the trucks, the apartment buildings, the streets, and the pedestrians all grew bigger. She saw what used to be her mother and father's farm and not long after the farm that had once belonged to Feral, but she did not know it, for he had never taken her there during their brief time together. She saw a glimpse of her store on the main street. She saw her old high school. She saw the roadhouse. The courthouse. The jail and the steps of the town hall. And when she turned away from the window it was with a heavy heart, for she had seen it all before.

It was two miles from the airport to Pandora's apartment. Reasoning that it was a beautiful day in Raven Rock and the air was fresh compared to what she was accustomed to breathing in New York City, Mona decided to walk. On her way, she wondered how Redblood was making out on his return trip? It was a long way to fly from New York and she imagined he would have to stop quite often to rest before reaching Raven Rock. But that did not stop her from looking up towards the sky or from checking the tree tops upon occasion.

No one recognized her in Raven Rock, at least not right away. It helped that during the day she still had a habit of wearing a hat and her dark sunglasses.

Pandora was not at the apartment, so after knocking several times Mona let herself in with the key that Pandora had given her the year before. She knew that something was wrong the moment she stepped into the apartment. Her plants did not greet her with their customary call. When she turned on a light she saw the reason for their silence. Instead of being green and full of life, they were now brown and they were dead! By the looks of them they had not been watered in weeks.

"Mona, is that you?" a faint call came from the cactus, who was the only survivor. Being able to last the longest without water he had lingered on.

"What happened? Where is Pandora?" Mona asked him.

"She went to Los Angeles a month ago with a man and sadly to say she has not returned."

Mona ran to get him a glass of water. "Isn't she coming back?"

"Yes, tonight, as a matter of fact. I heard her make the plane reservations. We all pleaded with her before she left to make arrangements to have someone come in and water us, but she could not hear us," the cactus said.

"Well, I will be waiting for her," Mona said.

Filled with hate and hunger Mona foraged through the kitchen cupboards to find there was no food. There were some steaks in the freezer, but there was nothing in the refrigerator that even remotely resembled a vegetable. Since she had not eaten for several days she went downstairs to the health food store. She had come in through the back of the building, so she had not seen the new sign that said: Pandora's Panty Parlor. Mona was livid when she saw Pandora

had put in a whole line of leather lingerie, silkworm stockings, nightgowns made out of fur, garter belts, and sexual gadgets galore. After stomping back up the stairs, still starving, she waited impatiently in the dark for Pandora's return. *

"You? You scared the hell out of me. What are you doing here?" Pandora asked when she came in by herself at four o'clock in the morning.

"I've waiting for you."

"In the dark?"

"The cops could be watching the place? What happened to my plants?"

"I had to go away on business. I thought I'd be back sooner," she lied.

"I see," said Mona, and for the time being that was all she said on the subject. She could tell by the look in Pandora's eyes that she was not happy to see her, so she said, "It's a matter of life and death."

"Who's?" Pandora quipped coldly.

"Don't worry, I won't be here long."

"I'm not worried," Pandora replied. "I can honestly say I don't care."

Mona laughed and was pitiless in her mocking of Pandora. "As long as I'm comfortable. As long as I am content. As long as I have a car, I don't care. That is the attitude of this country, and that is the attitude that is going to blow us all into oblivion at best, or at worst we are going to watch the world around us wither away," she said and you could tell by the look in her eyes that she was mad when she said it.

"What are you talking about?" Pandora asked while putting her luggage into the bedroom.

"Never mind," Mona answered evasively.

"What the hell are you doing back here, anyway? Are you crazy? Of course you are. But, do you know that the FBI is looking for you? Do you want to go back to the asylum? This time, girl, you'll get the gas chamber."

"Perhaps," Mona replied, remembering her dream.

"The Feds were here looking for you last month just before I left for Los Angeles."

"Oh really, what did you tell them?"

"The truth. I told them I had no idea where you were. But this time they had a search warrant. Because of you fucking Federal agents were poking around in my panty drawer."

"Speaking of downstairs, I see you opened up a sex shop?"

"It makes more money. Is that your own hair?" Pandora asked, for she was anxious to change the subject.

Mona shook her head and then she whipped off the red wig that she was wearing to reveal her own shoulder length blond hair that had grown back beautifully.

She changed wigs as often as she changed her underwear, for the following night she put on a long black one while Pandora got ready to go to the roadhouse. "I have to meet some salesmen," she said. "By the way, when is your bird coming back?" she asked on her way out the door.

"Soon. He should be here any time now." *

The cop car turned slowly down the side street in order to follow the woman in question. They switched off their headlights and they coasted whenever they could. "I'm telling you, from behind, she looks a lot like that Babcock woman," the policeman said.

"Mona Babcock is a blond. This woman has black hair."

"It could be a wig, or maybe she dyes it?"

"You're crazy," his partner replied, "it couldn't be Babcock. She's long gone. Nobody in her shoes would be nuts enough to waltz back into town. She'd have to be bananas to come back here. She's probably freezing her cunt up in Canada."

"I'm telling you, I'd recognize that walk anywhere."

"Well, we'll keep following her just to be on the safe side."

"I heard the FBI believes she's solely responsible for more than six hundred homicides."

His partner whistled. "Hey, maybe we'd better radio this in?"

"Ask for some back up as well."

"We're following a suspect we believe might be the Babcock woman. She is wearing a red rain coat. She appears to be carrying a large purse, and she has just turned towards the rail road tracks on the outskirts of town..."

"Where the hell is she going, anyhow?"

"I don't know, but she's crossing the tracks."

"Keep following her."

"I'm trying to."

"Look. Look at that bird."

"Where?"

"On the telephone pole. Over there, see it? It's looking right at us," the policeman pointed impatiently for his partner. "It looks like a raven," he added.

"So what? It's just a damn bird."

"I know, but it seems to be following her?"

"You'd better cut down on the caffeine," he chuckled.

"Slow down. She's stopped. She's tying her shoelace or something?"

"She's wearing high heels."

"Maybe she dropped something?"

Mona, bent over to get a better look at the law, was indeed walking with Redblood when the cop car came creeping up behind her. Her and Redblood were planning on leaving in the morning for Montana. As it turned out Hitler was not hiding in Washington State after all. Redblood had been mistaken. "He's in Montana. He's hiding in the mountains, not far from the madhouse as a matter of fact," Redblood informed her.

"Lovely," Mona had said, "you mean I came back to Raven Rock for nothing?"

"I'm sorry," he said.

"It's all right, Redblood, but are you absolutely sure?" she asked him.

"Yes, yes, I'm positive," he had replied and then they made plans to depart together.

Right now as a part of those plans they were going to see a friend of Pandora's about getting another gun. The one she had in her purse had been used on well over a hundred homicides and she did not want to get caught carrying it. She did not want to get caught at all, but if she did she certainly did not want something on her person that would give them an open and shut case, for this time they would get no heartfelt confession from her.

"Of course he can be trusted," Pandora had told her in regards to the gun dealer she was now going to see. "He's wanted for armed robbery in Oregon."

Although she knew the cop car was behind her there was nothing that she could do about it. Trying to outrun them would have been ridiculous. So she turned around and waited for them to approach. The car pulled up onto the curb and came to a stop. They shined a spotlight in her face, and once again she wished, more than ever before, that she was a bird with wings.

"Is it her?" asked one of the policemen.

"It's hard to say. It doesn't look like her, but let's be extra careful just in case."

Then just as they were getting out of their squad car one of the men was certain he heard a bird squawk.

"Mame, do you have some identification?"

Mona nodded. She reached into her purse and then through her blue contact lenses and her long black false eyelashes she looked directly into the eyes of the law, and said, "Is something the matter officer?"

"What are you doing in this part of town? It's a dangerous district for a woman to be alone at night?"

"No one but you is bothering me," Mona said.

He passed his partner the birth certificate that Mona had had enough foresight to purchase, for a high price, in Harlem. "Your name is Jane Forrester?" he asked.

"Yes," Mona replied.

"Hey, Ralph, run a check on her name," the policeman said to his partner, who went immediately to the driver's door to call their dispatcher.

"Where are you going?" the remaining officer asked the suspect.

"Home," she replied.

"Where are you coming from?"

"A friend's place," Mona said. She knew perfectly well that he wanted her to be more specific, but she could not contain her coldness or her contempt. These were the cops that had caused her incarceration. She had recognized them right away. They were the "turds" who had originally arrested her and she had propositioned them in the back of their cruiser. Now, she just prayed to God they would not recognize her until she was ready to wreak revenge.

Moving as far away from the cop as she possibly could without being conspicuous she coldly calculated the consequences of being caught, which in turn caused her to consider killing them both. No matter what the cost she was determined not to let history repeat itself, like a carbohydrate drink. She decided she would rather die on the spot than return to "the dungeon." But, since murder had become mundane, and violence was second nature to her now, she knew it was not her destiny to die. For, as a matter of course, she had become a machine quite capable of killing any cop. She noticed the street was dark and deserted. "Redblood," she called.

"Red blood?" the officer barely had time to repeat.

Perched on top of the telephone pole Redblood had been ready to attack for quite some time. Patiently watching the policemen, as they performed their duties as a pair of public servants, he was just seething to swoop down to do his duty, and he did so by diving directly into the officer's face. Wings flapping he delivered a series of powerful blows with his big beak. Mona took advantage of the opportunity presented to her by promptly pulling her pistol out of her purse. Swiftly and surely she fired. Excellent aim, she thought, when one half of the officer's face flew off. She did not have time to turn on her second assailant before he shouted, "FREEZE."

Mona froze, but not in fear.

"Drop the gun, lady, or you're dead!"

Mona did not drop the gun. Mona Babcock barely blinked.

"I said drop..."

Redblood repeated his previous performance by making another grand entrance from up above and again he flung himself at the man, giving Mona time to turn and fire. She shot him in

the shoulder, in the chest, and in the stomach. Still, he was alive, so she sent her two remaining shots into his skull. When she saw his body convulse from a death spasm she was satisfied. She was also shaking.

"I had no alternative," she told Redblood while running from the scene of her latest crime, "they would have arrested me and we would not have been able to stop Hitler."

While Mona was out killing cops, Pandora was at the apartment prying Mona's diary open with a screwdriver. By breaking the lock she was able to read a bold, and bloody, account of the Manhattan murders. She gasped, gagged, and ground her teeth. In her darkest dreams it had never dawned on her that Mona was the woman the papers were calling "the Manhattan Murderess."

"Oh, good God," she said to herself, "what am I going to do?" She remembered the expression of rage on Mona's face when she asked, 'What happened to my plants?' Pandora had not meant to kill them, but she was tired of watering them. It took a long time and a lot of energy to water two hundred potted plants. And after all they were Mona's responsibility, but, 'Pandora, you promised to take care of them.' Moreover, Mona did not seem to like the merchandise in the new store, but, 'Mona, there's a lot more money to be made in lady's lingerie.' Besides, Pandora was sick of selling goat's milk, wheat cakes, yogurt, fruits and nuts, and...

Pandora panicked when she heard the door open, for she suddenly realized that she was afraid of her friend. And Mona, coming into the room bug eyed and out of breath, did not make her feel any better.

"You look like you just ran a race?" Pandora said.

"I did," Mona replied, and then she went into the kitchen to make herself a cup of tea.

Pandora watched her go. She did not know what to do? Should she confront a sociopathic killer? Should she fink on her best friend? Should she try to convince her to turn herself in? She remembered the diary, but it was too late to fix the lock, for Mona was on her way back into the living room.

"Mona."

"What, Pandora, dear?" Mona responded with a certain lopsided lilt to her voice that left Pandora more uneasy than ever.

"How many people have you killed?"

"Tonight?"

Silence permeated the apartment until Pandora was finally able to find the courage to continue. And having done so she chose to ignore Mona's most recent revelation by repeating the question. "How many people have you killed, altogether?"

"I'm not sure. Six or seven hundred, I suppose?" she said with a smile on her face that was so sardonic even Satan himself would have difficulty duplicating it. Then she sat down and spotted the open diary on the coffee table.

Pandora decided that she did not know Mona anymore. Maybe she had never known her at all? Those killings in the beginning of nine people here in Raven Rock for environmental purposes she had been able to overlook. Perhaps, she thought at the time, Mona was troubled or temporarily out of touch with reality? But, the self-indulgent slaughtering of "six or seven hundred" human beings made Pandora quite literally want to puke. It made her skin crawl and it made her mad. Over the past year she had read in the newspaper about some of the victims. The whole world had. Now, on one hand, Pandora was well aware of the pollution problem and the importance of preventing it. After all, she thought, who now a days isn't? Everyone talks about

the environment. She herself recycles, tries not to waste water, uses phosphate free soap, and she does whatever she can to keep the country clean. 'Without giving up your car, your air conditioning, your creature comforts,' Mona's word came back to haunt her. That may be, Mona, Pandora thought, but mass murder is not going to solve the problem. No one woman can wipe out the entire human population no matter how determined she might be. And then Pandora remembered, all too vividly, that one of the victims she'd read about was a nine year old boy from Brooklyn. She had read that his mother had found his corpse in their backyard - strangled, mutilated, and according to the coroner he had been tortured terribly before dying from asphyxiation. Pandora decided that if it was true she would turn her over to the FBI first thing in the morning. "The boy? Did you kill the boy in Brooklyn?" she suddenly found herself asking "the stranger" sitting across from her.

It took her a moment to remember who Pandora was referring to and then she said, "Yes," without the slightest amount of sympathy or shame; but she was well aware of the thoughts that had been running through Pandora's mind for the past few moments. The cactus, on the coffee table, was still quite capable of communicating.

"What in the world for?" Pandora asked.

"He was torturing a toad." *

Jaded FBI agents who had been on the job for twenty years or more were aghast when they found parts of Pandora all over the blood smeared apartment. "In the kitchen cupboards, in all the closets, in the bathtub, in the bread box, in the refrigerator, in the oven, in an electric frying pan, in the microwave, in the cookie jar on the counter, in every conceivable corner," they claimed.

"And her head was planted in a pot of earth," one of the agents wrote in his report.

"It must have taken the Babcock woman hours to cut the corpse up into so many pieces," a rookie agent had said at the scene of the slaying, while the coroner said he could not even be certain about the cause of death.

Mona had spent most of the night chopping, sawing, and hacking away at her friend. "Here a piece, there a piece, everywhere a piece of Pandora," she sang to herself as she snipped and sawed, as she hemmed and hawed. Pandora had put up a ferocious fight, for she did not want to die, but she was no match for Mona, the Manhattan Murderess. Mona had wanted to handcuff her and watch her die of thirst, but of course she did not have the time, so she simply stabbed her to death and it could be said that she had a hey day doing it.

Right after planting Pandora's head in a pot of earth, as a type of totem for the tortured plants, Mona put on a pair of black jeans along with a pair of canvas hiking boots. She packed a few necessities into a knapsack. Then she hurried out of the apartment. Redblood was waiting for her in the alley behind the building and together they left town.

BEWARE! MONA BABCOCK IS BACK! was printed on the front page of every newspaper in Washington State, while animal rights activists and anti-pollution probes had picked up a propaganda pun and were passing it on for their political purposes: the promotion of a pristine planet, restoring the earth to its natural state, putting a ban on the building of nuclear bombs, etc.; all via a picture of Mona on a poster and the caption, IS SHE HAZARDOUS TO YOUR HEALTH?

The police were told once again to be on the look out for "the most homicidal maniac of the century." Citizens in the surrounding areas of Raven Rock were warned to watch for the woman who kills, the police claimed, without any kind of provocation.

"Redblood, you'd better be right about this," Mona said when they were on their way to Montana to find Adolf Hitler. Realizing the risk of taking a bus or a plane or a train she went through the woods with Redblood leading the way. On the outskirts of Spokane, Washington someone said they saw a woman, fitting her description, running with a raven, and at the Montana border several Idaho residents said they saw a woman riding on the back of a big grizzly bear.

Sitting on the egg, as he often does these days, while working on the little laptop computer that Rebecca bought him for his birthday, Raven thinks he hears something, so he stops typing. He is about to begin again when he feels a slight movement beneath his breast bone. Then he hears a cracking sound. "THE EGG! THE EGG IS HATCHING!" he hollers. "Rebecca, it's happening," he calls, but she is in the kitchen running the garbage disposal and the dishwasher at the same time. "Rebecca, it's happening. Hurry, come quickly. Rebecca, Rebecca, REBECCA..."

With wide eyes they watch in anticipation as their baby bird smashes its way through the thick shell. Raven is delighted to see he has a son, whom they finally decide to call "Radcliff," for no particular reason.

Rebecca is predisposed to preening his feathers, but they take turns feeding him, for Raven, filled with fatherly affection, will often disregard his writing to spend time with his son, who is beginning to look very much like his father the older he gets and the more he grows. "He has your feathers and your beak," Rebecca says.

Raven reads to him every night. Grimm's Fairy Tales are Radcliff's favorite, but certain scenes from Shakespeare will satisfy him just the same, as does Great Expectations, by Charles Dickens, and Gulliver's Travels, by Jonathan Swift.

"Father."

"What is it son?"

"It's about my flying lesson this afternoon."

"What about it?"

"I'm afraid. I'm afraid to fly. I'm afraid I'll fall."

"But, you're a bird?" a bewildered Raven says.

"Yes, I know, but I had a dream. A terrible, terrible dream. I dreamed that I was falling from the top of a very tall building."

"That's silly, son, for if you were to fall, all you would have to do is flap your wings."

"Like this?" Radcliff asks, as he beats his wings up and down.

"Just like that," Raven tells him.

When Radcliff leaves the apartment to meet one of his many friends Raven tells Rebecca

about their son's dream. "And furthermore, he's afraid to fly."

"He dreamed he was falling?" Rebecca asks and her voice is filled with concern. "You know, Raven, I've been worried about him. Have you seen some of his friends? They're the most disreputable characters one could imagine." She is about to say that they should never have moved to New York City, but she stops herself. She finishes putting another load of laundry into the dryer instead and then she starts sorting and folding her previous load. "Right now he's out running around with Mr. Rat's son," she says.

"Oh really," Raven replies, but he can see no harm in his hanging around with a rat providing he is a respectable one.

"They're New York City sewer rats," she says. "There's nothing respectable about the sewer rats in this city. And those pigeons that he plays with are all a bunch of bullies who belong to a gang. And dare I forget to mention Mr. Dove's delinquent daughter, Desmond."

"I'm worried too," Raven says.

"You should be I've seen them deal drugs in Times Square."

Raven nods his head and helps his wife with the laundry. "I've tried to talk to him, but he won't listen. He tells me they're his friends. I asked him once if he's ever done drugs, but he swears he hasn't."

"So far," Rebecca replies.

"All we can do, my dear, is keep our talons crossed," says Raven.

Rebecca frowns as she finishes folding her laundry. "I dare say, that's all any parent can do."

"Well, you know, Rebecca, I'm almost done the book. We could return to Raven Rock?"

Maybe part of the problem is the fact that there are no other ravens in New York City?"

"Possibly, but he's doing well in school. He has the highest grades in his class, and I'm sure that no matter where we live if Radcliff is looking for trouble he will find it."

Raven agrees. "Well, he's supposed to be back this afternoon for his first flying lesson. I'll talk to him some more."

At two pm Radcliff returns reluctantly. On one foot he is afraid to fly, while on the other foot he is looking forward to his first flying lesson. Right now he is standing on his foot of fear, for Raven has taken him out onto their balcony, and hoping to get him to fall, or rather fly, over the edge, he is attempting to wrestle with Radcliff, who crabs onto the railing and cries, "I can't. I can't. Father, I can't. Please, please don't make me do it."

"All you have to do is flap your wings. There is nothing to be afraid of," he assures his son. He considers telling him that there is nothing to fear but fear itself, but he is afraid that Radcliff will take the remark the wrong way and in the future will be fearful of nothing, which is not the wisdom that Raven wishes to impart upon his impressionable son. So, instead, to prove his point, he hops up onto the railing himself. And showing off just a bit, he jumps over the edge. He falls freely for forty floors and then he flaps his wings and flies back up onto the balcony.

Radcliff, watching all the while, says, "Wow!" for he is dumfounded by his father's daredevil dive.

"He's famous for that," his mother informs him later.

"Son, you see how simple it is," Raven tells him upon his return to the railing.

"Yes, but what about my dream?"

"No more silly talk. Trust me, you can fly. I know you can."

Perhaps, Raven thinks, a little push is all he needs, so he slyly says, "Just jump up on the railing next to your dear old dad."

Being an obedient bird Radcliff does as he is told, but standing beside his father he is still afraid, unsteady, and unsure of himself. Forty four floors below the brown Hudson river awaits. He does not wish to die in there and he is in the midst of saying a prayer when his father pushes him off the railing.

"Flap your wings," Raven shouts. Then quickly he follows his rapidly sinking son over the edge.

"Flap your wings. Flap your wings."

Radcliff, tumbling towards the ground at an incredible speed, does as he is told. He beats his wings and sure enough he can fly. "Look. Look. I'm flying. I'm flying," he exclaims joyfully in midair to his father, who is only a few feet away. Raven is thrilled to see that his airborne son is no longer a black blur plummeting headfirst towards the Hudson river. Subsequently he shows him how to soar. He teaches him how to use the wind to his advantage and how to ride on an air current. Catching one of the latter it lifts them both high above the skyline of New York City.

Only after several hours of sightseeing do they return home. Radcliff goes into his room to rest, while a famished Raven is pleased to find Rebecca in the kitchen cooking clams. "How did it go?" she asks. "Where is Radcliff?"

"He's in his room listening to records. Rap music I would imagine."

"I saw you go over the balcony together, but you never came back? For all I knew you were both dead at the bottom?"

"Oh stop your teasing," he tells her. "We flew out to Fire Island, and not only is our son flying, he is a faster flyer than me."

"WELL HE'S A BIRD, ISN'T HE?" one of the clams comments just before Rebecca drops him into a pot of boiling water.

"THAT WAS MY BROTHER, YOU BEAST. YOU BIG BLACK UGLY BIRD!" another clam cries accusingly.

"Quiet, clam, can't you see we're trying to carry on a conversation?" Raven says, and then Rebecca drops him and all of his brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, and cousins into the scalding hot water, for fresh baked clams are one of Raven's favorite dishes.

Right after dinner Desmond, Mr. Dove's daughter, drops by unexpectedly to see Radcliff. Her motive for coming is to invite him to go with her to the movies the following night.

"I wish I could, but I have exams the day after and I have to study tomorrow."

"Are you busy this weekend?" she coos.

Radcliff shakes his head. He says that he would love to go and then when he thinks that his parents are preoccupied he pinches her tail and pecks her on the cheek.

Mr. and Mrs. Dove are delighted that Radcliff is dating their daughter Desmond. Raven and Rebecca, however, are not pleased. "Of course, the Dove's are delighted," says Rebecca. "I'm sure it's the first time their daughter has ever had a formal date. She's a promiscuous 'pot head' who's been to bed with every pigeon in Central Park and her parents know it."

"You're probably right, Rebecca, but what can we do? If we tell him he can't see her he will rebel."

On the day of his date with Desmond Radcliff is too wound up to accomplish any of the weekend homework he has to do. He changes his clothes several times before he makes up his mind about what he wants to wear. He covers himself with his father's cologne and he quorks continuously.

"What movie are you going to see?" Rebecca asks them on their way out the door.

"Gone With The Wind," they say.

After the movie, after Scarlet O'hara throws herself at the foot of the spiral staircase for the loss of her beau Rhett Butler, Desmond suggests that they go to the Empire State Building. "It's not far," she says to Radcliff, who has been the object of her desire since the first day they met.

"You've been before?" he asks.

"Hundreds of times," she tells him. "Haven't you?"

"No, but it looks familiar," he confides to her after they turn the corner and she points to the tall building. They take the elevator up to the top, which seems strange to Radcliff for they could have flown in half the time. And with one of his wings across her shoulder Radcliff can't help wondering why his date wants to go to the top of this building to begin with, for after all she is a bird and she could certainly fly much higher? He asks her.

"My father won't let me fly. He doesn't care if I have sex with every bird on the block, or if I do drugs, or stay out late in a nightclub, but he won't teach me how to fly."

"That's terrible. A father should teach his offspring how to fly."

"He says if he ever catches me in the sky he'll kill me."

"Why?" Radcliff asks.

"I'm not sure, but I think it's because he's afraid I'll leave like all my brothers and sisters. Just fly the coop and never come back."

"Would you?" Radcliff wonders.

"I don't know," she replies.

"If you ever do, Desmond, I want to go with you."

Smiling, she says, "How come you don't have any brothers or sisters?"

"I did, but they died in a fire. I'm an only child."

At the top they exit the elevator and once they are in a corner by themselves Desmond lights a joint that she has saved for this special occasion. "Oh, it won't hurt you," she claims when Radcliff first refuses. "Don't be such a chickadee," she adds after he further resists.

"I promised my father I would never do drugs."

"Well he's not here now, is he?"

"No, but..."

"And what he doesn't know won't hurt him, will it?"

In part Radcliff succumbs to her reasoning, but primarily it is her pretty face that forces him to accept. He checks to make sure no one is watching, for he knows that if his father ever finds out he will be grounded for the rest of his life. Raven is always ranting on about how dangerous drugs are and he used his friend Puff as a prime example during these lectures. "What is it?" he asks Desmond, as he takes his first drag.

"Marijuana," she tells him, as she takes a toke. "And crack cocaine," she says with a smile while Radcliff sucks back his second. "With just a pinch of PCP," she adds. Then like a pro, she puts the joint into her beak backwards to give Radcliff something she calls "a supertoke."

"What is PCP?" he asks her upon exhaling.

"It's a hallucinogenic," Desmond openly declares. "Don't you know anything? I bet you're a virgin too?" she teases.

"I am not."

"You are too, but not after tonight," she promises. "I can't tell you how much you turn me on, you big black beautiful bird. I remember the first time I saw you at school. I had never seen a raven in New York City before. You took my breath away and you still do."

They have finished the joint when suddenly Radcliff's world becomes a woozy kaleidoscope of multiple colors and unreal images. Feeling euphoric he finds himself hopping all over the place. "I can fly," he announces.

"Of course you can," Desmond replies casually, for she is much more accustomed to the high they are having.

"And I can dive like my father, only faster. He even told me so. Watch," he says and then he flits over the barrier and onto the ledge on the other side, where he perches for only a second or two before he dives off the top of the Empire State Building.

"His neck was broken when he hit the pavement," Mr. and Mrs. Dove say when they return his body to Raven and Rebecca. "Desmond did not know what to do, so she called us from a pay phone. She said she saw him twirling headfirst towards the ground at an incredible speed."

"Why?" cries Raven. "All he had to do was flap his wings."

"Gone with the wind," Rebecca weeps.

O MAN: THE MURDERER

Several species of animals all played a part in helping Mona escape from the long arm of the law. Bloodhounds, supposed to track her down by sniffing out her scent, were tricked by a family of foxes who each dragged one piece of a torn T-shirt given to them by Mona. The cops were completely confused as to how she had gone in so many different directions all at once? They were even more baffled when she was seen crossing the Idaho border on the back of a bear. "Is it safe to assume that "the Manhattan Murderess" is somewhere in the State of Montana?" reporters asked the police.

"It is not safe to assume anything in regards to Mona Babcock," answered the FBI evasively.

The Rocky Mountains in Montana are a rugged range that not even Mona would have ventured into without the help of Redblood, who was leading the way. He still did not know the exact location of Adolf Hitler's hideout, but he knew they were getting closer. "He could be hiding anywhere," Mona remarked one morning while washing herself off in a waterfall. She felt fully refreshed, for she had just spent the night with a female mountain lion, who had been nice enough to let Mona curl up in the confines of her cave. Snuggled next to the purring cat she had fallen to sleep for the first time since fleeing from Raven Rock without being afraid that the FBI would find her before she awoke.

Of course she communicated with all the creatures that she came across. The grizzly bear that she had been seen riding was from Yellow Stone National Park and this morning he greeted her with his usual growl.

"Thank you, Mr. Grizzly," she said when he crouched down so that she could climb up onto his broad back.

Mona and her entourage had been travelling together now for quite some time. The geysers and the hot springs that they often found were always a welcomed relief, but the rivers and the

canyons that they sometimes had to cross were, more often than not, a nuisance that slowed them down. Mona had never been happier, however, in her entire life. Being surrounded by Mother Nature's peaceful environment had turned her into the epitome of tranquility. No one who knew her could have guessed that she could ever have attained such inner calmness.

All morning, and for most of that afternoon, they trudged through a dense forest that covered the side of the mountain they were trying to climb. The grizzly bear walked in front, because his body was the bulkiest he was best able to break through the thick underbrush.

"We'll rest here," Mona said, when at last they came to a clearing; but then in the middle of the field before them she saw... "A man," she whispered to her animal friends that had formed a semi circle around her. "What in the world is he doing here?" she wondered aloud. He appeared to be digging up the ground with a shovel or a spade. He was shirtless. His head was shaved. His feet were bare. He was wearing only a pair of summer shorts. She could see that he was a muscular man and just by the way he moved she could tell that he was a remarkable looking specimen. For no other reason than the fact that she was sexually aroused she pushed aside a cedar branch so she could get a voracious view. Then she checked in her knapsack to make sure she had her gun before going any further. "Is it him?" she asked Redblood.

"No," Redblood replied, "Hitler's a hideous little man with fourteen fingers, and no toes, and..."

"Wait here," she told the mountain lion, the wolf, the grizzly bear, the foxes, and Redblood. "I will find out who he is."

The man looked up from the hole that he was digging when he saw the woman come out of the woods. Probably a lost hiker, he thought to himself. He waved and leaned against his shovel as he watched her approach.

"Good morning," Mona called casually.

The man smiled and formally bowed his shaved head. Mona did not return the smile. Her eyes never strayed from the shovel in his hand, or her thoughts, from the hatred in her heart for all human kind. "What are you doing?" she asked on the offensive.

"Digging a hole," he replied and he was seemingly oblivious to her abrasive behavior. "Are you lost?" he asked, and doing so he emanated more warmth than a wood stove on a winters night.

"No, I'm looking for someone. A man," she said.

"What's his name?"

"His name is not important." His name, Mona thought, is better left unsaid, because even she had a hard time believing that Redblood was right. The likelihood of someone being called Adolf Hitler...?

"Well, no one lives on this mountain."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm positive. I'm the only person living in these woods."

"I see," she said.

He put down the shovel he was holding. Then he asked her her name.

"It's Mona," she told him.

"A beautiful name, for a beautiful woman. Where are you from?"

"Raven Rock," she replied. She was going to say New York, or Nebraska, or Nowhere, but for some reason she did not feel threatened by his presence or his questions.

The man nodded in a way that led her to believe he knew something about the town that she

did not, but in reality it was just his manner, for he had never heard of Raven Rock. "This person you're looking for, is he a friend?"

"No, but it's very important that I find him."

"Are you hungry?" he asked.

"I'm starving, but I must warn you that I don't eat meat."

His eyes sparkled. His entire face betrayed his subdued outer self when he flashed a radiant smile. "I don't eat meat either. I'm a strict vegetarian. I'm also a monk."

Mona stepped over the mound of earth that was between them. "And your name?" she asked.

"Leonardo."

"So, Leonardo, you live here all alone?"

"Yes, I have a cabin about a mile away." He pointed in the general direction. "Would you care to come for some supper?"

Mona hesitated. She was hungry and she could certainly use the rest, but the bomb that Hitler had built was more important than the pain in her stomach or the ache in her bones.

"I promise I'm quite harmless," he said.

She laughed. "Oh, I'm not worried about that. I'm concerned about the bomb."

Bewildered, he raised one eyebrow. "Well, whatever you want, but you look very tired?"

"I am. To tell you the truth, I'm exhausted," she said and then she agreed to go. "First, I have to tell my friends."

"You're not alone?" Leonardo asked with a look of alarm.

She smiled and then she called the animals out from the forest one by one. "Mr. Grizzly," she shouted and then he came lumbering, larger than life, towards them. Soon after the mountain lion sauntered slowly over to Mona's side. The foxes and Mr. Wolf finally wound their way through the field exploring as they went; while Redblood, who had been watching from a tree top, circled the clearing in which Mona, the monk, and the animals all stood. Swooping down from the sky he landed on his mistress's shoulder which is where he stayed.

"These are my friends," she proudly informed him.

"How amazing."

"Not really," she replied nonchalantly, "it amazes me that all men are not on friendly terms with the animals."

"Alas, mankind," the monk said and he said it much like Mona might have.

At the cabin she was utterly impressed and delighted to see that it was not made out of logs - trees that had once been alive - it was constructed entirely out of stone. "I built it myself with my own hands," he said and he held up his huge hands for proof. "I gathered the rocks from the riverbanks. You might think I'm nuts, but I don't cut down trees for timber," he told her.

Even though she had trouble trusting another human being after he told her about his feelings for trees Mona was completely taken. Except for Feral she could not remember ever being this attracted to someone both physically and spiritually, and in such a short time.

In the cabin Leonardo told Mona to have a seat while he made supper. The couch, also made from stones, was covered with pillows that were stuffed with soft pine needles that Leonardo had gathered from the forest floor. And upon sitting down, she said, "I've never sat on anything so environmentally friendly, not to mention comfortable."

Leonardo laughed. "I'm going to build a fire." He told her as he knelt down by the fireplace that filled one wall. "I don't know if you're interested or not, but something tells me you are. I only burn dead wood that I find in the forest. I never cut down a tree unless it has already lost it's

life. Mother Nature supplies me with all the necessities and many of the luxuries I need without having to harm her in any way."

How wonderful, Mona thought and she was becoming more attracted to him by the minute. "What's for supper?" she asked. "It smells delicious."

"Root and berry stew."

"Mmmm, sounds scrumptious."

After they dined Leonardo offered her his bed for the night. "You can rest and be on your way in the morning if you wish?"

Mona thought it was a good idea, so she went outside to tell Redblood. "Will you ask the animals, wherever they are, to meet me tomorrow morning?"

Redblood said that he would find them and inform them; and he would stay as a sentry by the cabin all night. "Do you like this man?" he asked before leaving.

Mona did not give him a full confession of her feelings, but to satisfy the twinkling curiosity in Redblood's black eyes, she admitted, "He's everything all men should be." Then she hurried into the cabin where she found her bed made and another fire burning. Leonardo was sitting in a corner of the room meditating. When he finished a few moments later he laid down on the floor without even a blanket to cover his beautiful body.

At dawn he was sitting once again in a lotus position with his back against the wall when Mona awoke. She watched him until he opened one eye and winked at her. Caught off guard and somewhat self-conscious to have been caught staring she looked quickly away against her will. "Good morning, Mademoiselle. Did you sleep well?"

"I must have slept soundly, for I don't even remember falling to sleep," she said.

Smiling, he continued to stare into her eyes. "Breakfast is ready. I hope you don't mind baked beans?"

"Not at all. I'm famished."

Before breakfast she went outside to find Redblood on the roof. "Morning, Miss Mona," he quorked in good humor.

"Good morning, Redblood," she said. "Did you get some sleep?"

"I nodded off occasionally. I've been thinking," Redblood began. "that it would be better if you stayed here while I go search for Hitler's hide out. I can fly over the forest faster than you can walk through it. In other words I can cover more ground, and as soon as I find out where he is I'll return to take you directly to him. And besides," he added solicitously, "you'll be safe here."

Mona said that she thought it was a great idea. Redblood knew perfectly well that the possibility of romance was the secondary reason for her to remain at the cabin and he couldn't have been more delighted for his mistress. "I'll ask Leonardo if it's all right," Mona said.

"I'm sure he won't object," Redblood replied.

Leonardo told her, while they ate their breakfast, that he would be honored to have her as a guest in his humble home.

Mona promised Redblood that she would be waiting eagerly for him to return and then she watched him go off into the air to find Adolf Hitler and the bomb.

Several hours later into the day she was sitting with Leonardo under a pine tree, because Mona insisted that they not sit in the sun. "I always sit in the shade. There's something about the sun that scares the, excuse the pun, daylight out of me."

Leonardo might have laughed except there was something very sacred in the tone of her

voice. She spoke with such sadness, he thought, perhaps she was a prisoner of dark shaded places all over the globe. A gloomy person who could never enjoy the warmth the world had to offer. But why, he wondered? "The sun is simply a star," he told her tenderly. "It's ninety three million miles away. It's center is twenty nine million degrees fahrenheit. It is four point five billion years old. Directly or indirectly the sun furnishes all the energy supporting life on earth. It's something to be cherished."

"That's why I'm afraid of it," Mona said, and then she went on to talk about her fears of global warming and the thinning of the ozone layer.

"It was the ozone layer that allowed life to form on earth, for it protected the planet from the sun's ultra violet rays, so if it disintegrates then you're right we do have a great deal to fear, but a beautiful woman such as yourself should not worry so much."

Mona looked away, for compliments of any kind usually made her self-conscious. "It's not myself I'm worried about. One day I will die no matter what. It's all the innocent animals, and the plants, and the flowers, and all things living that will never be again," she said and then she gazed out across her surroundings. "How long have you lived here?" she asked.

"Ah, let me see, I moved to this mountain eleven years ago, on my twentieth birthday to be exact."

"We're the same age," she said somewhat amazed. She was even more amazed, however, when she learned they were both born in the month of May and on the identical day.

"Astrologically speaking we could be quite compatible?" he told her.

"How do you spend your time?" she asked, because for the time being she felt it best to change the subject.

"I meditate. I commune with nature. Unlike you, though, I can not communicate with animals."

"And who were you before you became a monk?"

"Just a man like millions of others. I come from San Francisco. My parents are both professional people. I have an older brother who's a broker, and a younger sister who sells real estate."

"Do you ever visit them?"

When he shook his shaved head Mona noticed a certain sadness in his dark green eyes. "Then you're an American?" she inquired.

"I do not conform to the confines of any country. I do not believe in boundaries or borders or citizenship. They are all trappings of mankind. I am a person who lives on this planet, period."

"I totally agree with you," Mona remarked.

"And you, who are you?" he asked.

Mona looked away and then she gazed down at the ground. She turned her attention towards an ant that was walking towards her toe. "Should I tell him, Mr. Ant?"

"The truth shall set you free," said Mr. Ant.

Then when a butterfly landed on a wild flower not too far from her, she asked, "Should I tell him, Mr. Butterfly?"

"The truth shall set you free," Mr. Butterfly replied.

"Wild flower, should I tell him?"

"The truth shall set you free," the flower also informed her.

"My name is... Mona Babcock!"

The expression on Leonardo's face did not change like she supposed it would when he heard

the name of the nations most wanted criminal, so she asked, "Doesn't that name mean anything to you?"

"Are you famous?" he inquired, and he thought that she was beautiful enough to be a movie queen, or...

"I'm infamous," she said. "I'm Mona, the Manhattan Murderess. I am Raven Rock's Environmentally Friendly Killer." She waited for him to say something, but he was silent. She waited for him to run, but he remained where he was. She waited for the ant or the flower or the butterfly to tell her again how the truth would set her free, but the butterfly had flown away, the ant had gone off with some members of his family, and the flower had fallen to sleep, for the sun was on it's way down.

Then at last Leonardo announced, "I have never heard of you. I don't read the newspapers and as you know I have no television or radio."

"I'm a murderess," Mona plainly stated, for it had never occurred to her that he had no contact whatsoever with the world. "I killed nine people in Raven Rock. I was sent to an asylum here in Montana, but I escaped. I moved to Manhattan and there I killed over six hundred human beings."

Leonardo closed his eyes, crossed his legs, and started to chant. "What were your reasons?" he asked when after a while he opened his eyes.

"I used to believe that I was on a mission for Mother Nature, but now I'm not so sure?" she said.

"One day you will know why. One day the truth shall set you free," he just happened to say.

"Or fry me," Mona remarked.

"You must mean the electric chair?" Leonardo asked.

"Or life in prison without the possibility of parole," Mona replied.

"If it was up to me I would not punish you or anyone for trying to protect the planet from the pernicious people who persist in destroying it."

"Don't I scare you?"

"I am not afraid to die, and I do not think that you would kill me."

"No, never," Mona told him and she meant it. "I am not a hazard to your health," she added, having herself seen one of the posters that were still being plastered all across the countryside. Suddenly, upon rising to her feet, she announced, "I want you, I want you to shave my head."

After he covered her head with the soap that he had worked up into a lather he then scraped away at her skull with his stainless steel scalpel until her head was as hairless as his. Then they made love in the grass and not only was Leonardo long lasting, he was fiercely affectionate, and it was the first time since Feral that Mona could remember feeling so fulfilled.

In the blissful days that followed, while waiting for Redblood to return, they fornicated and fasted.

"Fasting is as cleansing as prayer," he informed Mona when she asked him why he was not eating. Then she joined him by partaking in nothing but pure spring water.

Leonardo noticed that she did not use any type of birth control, so he questioned her one night when she came into the cabin after looking for Redblood. "I don't know what's taking him so long. Maybe he's lost?"

"A raven? Never," Leonardo assured her. Then he asked her about the birth control.

"I gave myself an abortion several years ago and the doctors say I will never be able to get pregnant again. Does that bother you?"

"To me, my dear, you are as sacred and as life giving as the sun itself," he sweetly said.

I'm falling in love, at last, Mona thought, with a man who does not eat animals. With a man who is nice to Mother Nature. With a man who is even more of a martyr than me. O man, what am I going to do? she asked herself. Should I actually marry, Mr. Martyrdom?

Leonardo must have been on the same wave length or else it was remarkable timing on his part, for no sooner had she thought about marriage, when he said, "I love you Mona Babcock. I don't care if you are a cold-blooded killer. I don't care if you killed a hundred million people. I want you to marry me. I want you to stay with me forever. I need you more than the earth itself. Stay with me, my darling. Marry me. Society will never find you here."

Mona told him all about the bomb. She said that after she found Adolf Hitler and had it out with him she would come back and be his bride. Leonardo said that he would gladly go with her, so that afternoon, while he prepared for their trip, she went for a walk through the woods with the hopes of finding Redblood. "I am going to be a wife, at last," she happily sighed to herself.

It was a coincidence when she came to the clearing where she had first met the monk, who called himself Leonardo. She saw the place where he had been digging that hole, but now it was filled in with fresh earth. She stepped up to it and stuck her bare foot into the soft sand. There were wild flowers, like the ones around the cabin, planted on the mound. "Hello, flowers," she said.

"Good day, Mona."

"Who planted you here?"

"The monk," the flowers said.

"Why?"

"We cover the grave of a young girl."

"What do you mean?" Mona asked with a terrified look on her face, for she was frightened by the foreboding sensation that had started to fill her entire being.

"There is the body of a young girl in the ground. This is a grave."

"How can you be so sure?" she asked.

"It is a shallow grave. Our roots are touching her corpse."

"Who put her there?" she demanded to know, even though she already knew.

"The monk. Who else?" the flowers informed her. "He was digging this hole the day you came. He buried her body here that night while you were sleeping. Then he dug us out of the ground and replanted us."

"Who, who is the girl?"

"We do not know. We only know she was very young when she died and the monk man had his way with her in his cabin before he killed her, like all the others."

How, how, how could I have been so blind? Mona asked herself in anger. "What others?"

"This is not the only grave," the flowers told her.

"What do you mean? Where are the others?" she asked weakly.

"There is a path through those woods that leads to another clearing. Follow it and it will take you there."

She staggered away. Sick to her stomach. Stunned. In a state of shock. Lied to. Used. Abused. Scared. Hurt. Humiliated. Brainwashed. All of the above and much, much more. What am I going to do? she wondered. And what if he is watching me?

"No, you are safe," a three hundred year old tree told her. "There is no one else in these woods."

"Thank you," she said with a sigh of relief. "Mr. Tree, do you know where Redblood is? Or Mr. Grizzly? Or Mrs. Mountain Lion? They said they would be back."

"I'm sorry, I haven't seen them," the tree told her.

The path she was following took her to another clearing just like the flowers said it would. Here, she counted up to twenty graves before she stopped counting and everyone of them was covered with wild flowers.

"Young girls. All young girls," these flowers told her and at the time she felt like she was going to faint.

"O man," she said to herself while staring at the graves. "I have to get my gun."

Leonardo was meditating when Mona got back. He had his eyes closed as always and was chanting and later she would say to herself, "I should have killed him right then and there. I could have kicked him in the head with my hiking boot and then hit him with a rock."

Unaware at the time of the forthcoming terror that was in store for her she sat down on the couch, picked up her knapsack and pretended to pull out some personal belongings when in fact she was frantically foraging for the gun. But, it was gone. Had he taken it? Of course, who else? Her mind moved to the scalpel he had shaved her head with, but it was probably in his pocket. She wondered if it was the weapon he used to kill all those girls, or did the sick son of a bitch strangle them with his huge hands?

"What's the matter, Mona?" Leonardo, the monk, the monster, the mad man, asked when he opened his dark green evil eyes.

"Nothing."

"I sense that you're upset?"

"I'm just a little worried about Redblood. He should have returned by now."

"Don't worry, he'll be back, my beautiful."

"How can you be so sure?" she snapped, for suddenly a thought occurred to her. What if Leonardo has done something dreadful to him. What if Redblood returned while she was out walking or while she was sleeping and...

"Is there something else troubling you?" he asked, as he joined her on the couch.

Mona smiled. "I think I'm just hungry. I'm afraid I don't have enough fortitude for fasting."

Leonardo laughed. "That's all right. Why don't we go out and pick some berries?"

"Could you go? I'd like to lie down. I'm getting an awful headache. Hunger, you know."

"Of course," he said and before he left the cabin he kissed her good-bye, which made Mona cringe.

The black berry bush is not very far away, Mona thought. "I won't have enough time to set a trap," she said out loud to herself, but after finding out the only love in her life since Feral was himself a serial killer, she swore she would find a way. She searched the cabin for a weapon that she could use. There were no knives. There was nothing. Not even a hammer and a nail. And she couldn't just clobber him over the head, anyhow. Leonardo was twice her size and probably three times as strong. What has he done with my gun? He can't be carrying it with him. He's wearing shorts. He must have hidden it somewhere? In the woods maybe. But, why? Is he planning on killing me? And if he is, well then when? she wondered. What is he waiting for? He's had plenty of opportunities. She was rummaging carefully through a canvass bag that belonged to Leonardo when she found the journal, which dangerously reminded her of her own diary. She ran to the only window in the cabin to make sure he wasn't coming before she started to read: I went into the city today and found another girl. Like all the others I tied her up and

carried her through the woods. She cried and told me that kidnapping is a capital crime. She was a precocious little thing. I laughed and slapped her fourteen year old fucking face and then I gagged her mouth. She was a virgin, but after I brought her back to my castle her little cunt was mine for the taking. I took it twice before I killed her.

I almost got caught today by the strangest woman I have ever met. She came out of the woods and saw me digging the girls grave, but the body was tucked away in the woods. The funny thing is she told me she was a killer. At first I didn't believe her. I thought she was on to me and it was some kind of set up. Later, I learned she wasn't lying when I found her gun and her diary. I've kept the gun, but I left the diary. I want to tell her about my murders, but I don't know how she will react? Furthermore, I think I've fallen in love with her...

Mona knew exactly how she was going to react and love was the weapon she was going to use. Having read more than enough, to make up her mind that Leonardo was a lunatic, she put the journal back. She sat down on the couch and with a pine needle pillow propped behind her back she felt like a victim of circumstance. Trapped in a cabin on a mountain side with no gun and with no where to go she now knew how it felt to be in the clutches of a crazed killer. She did not like the feeling. She picked up her knapsack to look once more for the gun when she noticed her handcuffs buried on the bottom. Then, like drifting back into the same bad dream, the cabin door opened and Leonardo, the latest love in her life, came in with a bowl full of berries.

In front of the fireplace their nude bodies were ablaze. Because of the flames flickering in the fireplace? No, because while they were fucking they were fighting for control. When penetration took place Leonardo noticed Mona was a lot less passive than usual. Not that she had ever been particularly passive to begin with, but she was certainly more aggressive than she had ever been before. "I like it when you're rough," he told her, so she raked her long fingernails across his backside until she drew blood.

"Do you love me, Leonardo?" she mumbled with her mouth on his.

"I adore you," he declared.

Mona, using her body as bait, told him to turn over. Now lying on his back she sat down on him. She urged him into position with her pelvis. It gave him a great deal of pleasure, while it gave her the opportunity she needed. His hands had to be above his head. Earlier while he was cooking dinner she had hidden the handcuffs in one of the pine needle pillows so that when the time came all she had to do was pull it out and - presto! She had attached one link to a steel rod that was securely cemented into the fireplace. I never told you I was a prostitute, she thought to herself while faking one hell of an orgasm. Given the opportunity she grabbed it by clamping the cuff around his wrist. She snapped it shut, sprang away before he could grab her with his free hand, and shouted, "Got you."

"What is this?" Leonardo laughed, for he was not, as of yet, the least bit alarmed. He was thinking more along the lines of lovemaking with a little kink thrown in. It wasn't until she starting putting her clothes on that he became concerned and rightfully so. "What are you doing?" he asked, as he tried in vain to jerk himself free.

She gave him the most withering look. "I know," she growled.

"What, what do you know?"

"I know about the girls," she growled again.

"Hey, listen I never said you were the first."

"Don't try to be funny, because it won't save your miserable life. Nothing will."

"Let me explain..." he started to say, but he struggled some more with the handcuffs instead of finishing the sentence.

"Where's my gun?"

"I hid it. I'm sorry, but I didn't completely trust you at the time. That was before we made love. I didn't know if you would try to kill me?"

"Well, now you know," Mona said. "Were you planning on killing me?" she asked.

"I would never hurt you. How do you know about the girls?"

"I not only talk to animals, you moron, I can talk to trees and to flowers as well. They told me everything. I saw the graves. I know every gritty detail about their deaths."

"Hey, what are you going to do with that?" he asked in a panicked way when she picked up a wooden stick that was approximately fifteen inches in length.

"I'm going to do to you what you did to those girls. I'm going to rape your virgin ass, assuming it is virginal?"

"Leave me alone, you fucking bitch," he shouted and then he tried grabbing her with his free hand, but she was a foot and a half too far away. "I should have strangled you when I had a chance."

"Yes, you should have," she said with a smile.

"You kill. Who are you to judge me?"

"I only kill the vermin who deserve to die. You kill to satisfy your sexual appetite. You rape for release and for no other reason."

"You too will be judged one day," he hollered and then he yanked at the handcuffs over and over again.

"Yes, but not by you," Mona said. She swatted him several times with the stick, but when he tried to kick her she stopped to search for the scalpel.

"What are you looking for?"

"Well, as much as I know you'd thoroughly enjoy this big wooden stick I don't think I'll be able to do it while you're still alive, but if you want I can ram it up your rear end after your dead? Oh, you asked me a question. I'm looking for your scalpel. Perhaps, you could point me in the right direction?"

Leonardo frantically tried to free himself when Mona picked up the shorts he had been wearing. "Ha, ha, I found it," she said, and then she held up the stainless steel scalpel for him to see.

"How are you going to get close enough, you stupid fucking bitch? If you come near me I'LL RIP OFF YOUR HEAD!"

"You shall soon see," she said with her back to him. She was stooped over sharpening the scalpel on a stone when Leonardo suddenly yanked himself free. The snapping sound that the handcuffs made when they broke was unmistakable. Damn that man in the New York novelty shop, Mona thought. I paid fifty dollars for them and they're a piece of junk, but then on his behalf a lot of people have pulled on them, so perhaps they are past their prime? But, why now? she wondered. It's funny, she thought, the things that go through your mind when your life is in danger, and no one knew better than her how much danger she was in. The look on Leonardo's face alone was enough to frighten her let alone the fact that he had a penchant for killing and had threatened to do so only moments ago.

He was standing on one side of the cabin. She was standing on the other. "One of us is going to die," she, who had the scalpel, said to the one who had the strength.

Like a leopard leaping on a grazing gazelle Leonardo lunged at Mona. Lashing out at him with the scalpel lady luck was on her side, for the stainless steel blade sliced into the side of his face. Mona was ecstatic when she saw her assailant stumble backwards with his hand held across the cut. She did not wait for him to attack again. By taking the offensive she felt that she would have a better chance of beating him, so she lunged at Leonardo, but the swift gazelle was no match for the large leopard. Leonardo grabbed hold of her wrist with one of his huge hands. Twisting her arm like a pretzel he punched her in the face and then he hurled her across the room. After hitting her head on a corner of the fireplace she fell onto the floor close to unconsciousness.

"Now, I am going to kill you," he claimed, and in a rage he wrapped his fingers firmly around her throat.

Mona came crashing back to consciousness to find that she could not breathe. Leonardo was straddling her and even though she did not stop struggling it was impossible to get out from under him. She saw the sparkling blade of the scalpel lying on the floor, but it was too far away. Ripping ferociously at his face with her fingernails she managed to claw the gash she had previously given him. He hollered and removed his grip, but only long enough for her to yell, "MURDERER, YOU MURDERER," and then he pinned her down again. Mona saw strings of saliva at each corner of his mouth as he dug his thumbs into her throat - blocking her wind pipe and the passage of air, her voice box and the verbal abuse she would otherwise have laid upon him. It is difficult to say whose contorted face was more colorful, his, with the redness of rage, or hers, which was purple from a lack of oxygen? Her eyes rolled backwards and any second now her heart would stop beating, and... She heard a faint sound outside the cabin door, which in fact was the farthest thing from being faint, for what Leonardo heard with all his senses intact was a loud crash directly against the cabin door, followed by a growl, and another crash, and another growl; and the crashing and the growling continued until the door gave way. Leonardo let Mona go and jumped up just in time to see the thousand pound grizzly bear burst into the room and rear on his hind legs.

Lying on the floor with very little life left in her Mona heard an all too familiar call. "Quork. Quork. Quork." Redblood had returned.

"Are you sure you're all right?" he asked her long after Leonardo was dead.

"I'll be fine," she assured him, though her throat was very swollen and extremely sore.

Redblood wondered what had happened to her hair, but he thought he'd let her recover some more before he mentioned it.

"So, did you find Adolf Hitler?" Mona hoarsely asked.

"Yes, and we must hurry. Are you sure you can travel?"

"Of course, where is he?"

"You'll never guess. He's on this mountain."

"Where?"

"On the other side."

"Can we climb over the top?"

"No, it's too steep," Redblood told her.

"Then we'll have to make our way around the mountain," Mona said, and not surprisingly she sounded once more very much like a woman with a mission.

A heart broken Raven and Rebecca both grieve for the loss of their son for several days before they can even consider placing his body in a cardboard box and burying him in Central Park. And, furthermore, until they feel up to facing the finality of a funeral, because of the humidity they find it necessary to keep Radcliff in the deep freeze.

"We should have taken him out to thaw last night," they say in unison on the day of the funeral, for Radcliff is frozen solid.

"Put him in the microwave on defrost," Rebecca says from beneath her black veil.

Less than two hours later they bury him together in a heavily wooded area of Central Park. "He loved it here," Raven says as part of the eulogy that he reads for Radcliff. "He was a fine student, and a fine son. We loved him very much. We will miss him dearly. If, if only he had flapped his wings."

Some of the animals that live in the park stop, when they see the service, to pay their respects. Most of them did not know Radcliff personally, but they all heard about his infamous fall from the Empire State Building.

"We are a close knit community," says Mr. Snake.

"We have to be, what with all the crime," a Park Avenue pigeon points out.

A tearful Rebecca does her best to remain calm, but when she watches Raven cover their son's casket (a shoe box) with dirt she almost dies herself. The friends that she has made since coming to New York are with her now, and they try to comfort her all they can. "It will be all right, Rebecca," says Mrs. Snake soothingly.

"Unlike you Mrs. Snake I can not shed my skin," Rebecca says and then she bursts into tears.

"She has not been out of bed since Radcliff's fall," Mrs. Robin comments.

"She doesn't even watch her soap opera in the afternoon anymore," says Mrs. Swan.

"Which one is that?" asks Mrs. Snake, for she herself watches several of the soaps.

"You know the one that takes place in Bay City, Michigan."

"Another World," Mrs. Robin replies knowingly.

"Yes, that's the one."

"Well, we must help Rebecca all we can," says Mrs. Snake.

Then Mr. and Mrs. Dove show up unexpectedly and everyone at the funeral falls silent. Some whispering can be heard, however, especially if you are Mr. and Mrs. Meadow Mouse, who have excellent hearing. They are able to eavesdrop on nearly everything that is being said.

"How dare those dirty downtown Dove's come here after what their disgusting daughter did," says Mrs. Snake.

Ms. Swan also has something scathing to say on the subject. "Look at her dress, it's disgraceful."

Raven isn't whispering when he goes up to the Dove's and demands to know where Desmond is? He is infuriated by the fact that she has not come to show her respects, since at the moment he feels she is solely responsible for Radcliff's fall.

"She's in a detox center," Mr. Dove explains, and then he apologizes over and over again for his daughter delinquent behavior.

"I'm sorry too, for if anyone is to blame, it is I," Raven replies remorsefully. "It's my fault that we moved to this city," he adds, and Rebecca happens to overhear him. She flies off in a rage and disappears for the rest of the afternoon. No one, not even Raven knows where she has

gone.

Upon her return that evening they talk about going back to Raven Rock, and they even go so far as to prepare for the trip. They pack their bags and make plane reservations, but at the last moment Rebecca breaks down and cries. "Raven, we can't run away. It's wrong. There is nothing in Raven Rock except for ravens and rocks." And then she smiles bravely and starts to sing Sinatra: "...my little town blues are melting away. We'll make a brand new start of it in old New York. If we can make it here, we'll make it anywhere. It's up to you New York, New York."

Raven holds her tightly. "It will be all right. It has to be," he whispers into her ear. "By the way, where did you fly off to this afternoon? I was worried."

"I flew to the top of the Empire State Building," she says.

Raven asks her why and she tells him she needed to see the place for herself. "I wanted to see where it happened. I just sat there for several hours on the ledge looking out over the city. In all my life I have never felt so lost and alone." She cries some more.

"Did it help?" Raven asks her, as he pulls her even nearer.

She shakes her head and buries her beak in her husband's chest. "Raven, I want you to say it was not your fault, because it wasn't. If anyone is to blame it is Radcliff himself. He made the decision to do those drugs. Now, say it was not your fault."

"I can't. If I hadn't moved my family to this city he would be alive."

"If you hadn't saved him from the fire he would never have been hatched. Now, say it was not your fault. Say it," she insists.

"It was not my fault."

"Say it, and mean it," she demands.

"It was not my fault. It was not my fault. It was no one's fault. Nobody is to blame. It just happened," Raven says and then he too begins to cry.

After a while he throws himself into his work as a type of revenge, and in doing so one night after dinner, while watching the news, he makes an announcement. He is a feather away from finishing the book.

"Thank the good Lord for something," Rebecca says in a jocular manner, for it has been more than a month since Radcliff's unfortunate fall, and her broken heart has mended some. "Now, do you have to find a publisher?" she inquires casually.

It seems to take him an eternity to answer Rebecca's question and finally she becomes concerned, for when he does reply his voice is void of emotion. "Yes, I suppose so," he listlessly says. His broken heart is only just beginning to mend. Quite often it has occurred to him that he feels lifeless and hollow inside, like a dead Thanksgiving day bird that has had all its stuffing removed.

Finally when the news is finished Raven rises to his feet and eventually for Radcliff's memory he will rise to the occasion as well. In a suit and a tie he goes to see several publishers, who unwisely want nothing to do with "a bird," or more importantly with his book.

He is sitting in an outer office cracking open one Brazil nut after another with his beak when the receptionist, he saw several hours ago, finally returns. She tells him, however, that he will have to leave. "But first," she says, "clean up the mess you've made."

After picking up the shells and putting them into the briefcase he is using to carry the manuscript, he goes to another publishing house. They will not even allow "the bird" into their building. "Send us a synopsis," they say indifferently.

As unsuccessful as he is at trying to crack open all the hard cases across town he does not

give up, but he quickly finds out that getting a book published is a hard a nut to crack as the Brazil nuts in his briefcase. "GET OUT OF HERE, YOU BIG BLACK BIRD, AND TAKE THAT BLOODY BOOK WITH YOU, GO ON, SHOO..."

An editor from yet another publishing house, after reading only one chapter, says, "Not only have you jumped on the environmental bandwagon like everybody else trying to make a buck, but you're a bird!"

Raven informs the man that everybody should be jumping up and down on the environmental bandwagon like their lives depend upon it, because, he declares, they do. But, it seems the man is unenlightened or just too busy to listen.

"Beat it, bird, I am busy," are his final words.

The rejections become too much to take in person, so Raven begins mailing the manuscript Priority Post. He reasons that by doing so the fact that he is "a Faulkner with feathers" will be privileged information. They will think he is a human like Thomas Hardy, Hemingway, Hawthorne, Herman Melville, Tolstoy, Tennessee Williams, or why not all of the above rolled into one raven?

After sending out more than a dozen copies, most of which are returned unopened, he finally receives an offer from a prestigious publishing house in Manhattan. His spirits soar. "And justifiably so," says Rebecca, who is almost as rejoiceful as her husband.

"I'm happy to hear it. He worked so hard," says Mrs. Snake.

"He certainly does deserve some recognition," Mr. Duck, who has become a close friend, comments.

"Perhaps, he will win a Pulitzer Prize?" says Mrs. Mouse.

"It's possible. He is a wonderfully gifted writer," Mrs. Robin replies with conviction, for she is reading the book and since she is an English school teacher (who spends her spare time reading classics like Dostoevsky's Crime and Punishment) she believes she knows what she is talking about.

Raven tells everyone the good news: the homeless that hang out in Central Park, the man at the corner that panhandles for spare change on a regular basis, the paraplegic professor of anthropology confined to a wheelchair whom he passes every day in the hallway, the seventy five year old superintendent of his apartment building, the East Indian electrician who came on one occasion to fix a light fixture in their living room, the Chinese gentleman at the convenience store, and the mailman are all inclined to congratulate him.

Then the editor insists on some small changes, but they are so incidental that Raven does not mind making them. He is pleased when the publisher tells him that they have indeed decided to put the picture of Puff on the front cover per Raven's request, and yes, the book will definitely be dedicated to the dragon in love, and no, there will be no problem with printing Puff's Poem on the first page.

He is not pleased, however, when the publisher tells him that they want to change the title of the book. "Absolutely not," Raven replies; so even though the publicity department is clamoring for something catchier, when the book is released it will be called: The Woman from Raven Rock.

REDBLOOD'S REVENGE

Hitler was spying on Mona with a periscope, as she came up the side of the mountain on the back of a big grizzly bear. This bothered him, because of a five year old fear he had of bears. Upon first moving to the Montana mountain range he had been mauled, albeit not badly, by a black bear. So why, he wondered, would a woman be riding on the back of such a wild animal? Then when Mona was less than a mile away he was able to get a clear view of her face with the periscope. Now, he was more afraid of her than the bear, for unlike Leonardo he watched the news, so he had seen that face a hundred times on the television. Her hair was gone, but her features were unforgettable to Adolf's photogenic memory. She's that mad woman from Raven Rock, he thought, and if he had been able to run he would have, but as if were his legs were weak and there was no where to go. "Why is the Manhattan Murderess on my mountain?" he asked himself several times.

He turned away from the periscope to look for the World War II pistol that had once belonged to his father. Hitler had never fired it, and furthermore, he could not find it. He was having difficulty breathing, so he sat down by his computer. For several weeks now he had been aware of his failing health. Ever since his fortieth birthday when he tried to blow out the candle on the stale cupcake that he had kept for the occasion. The candle, the kind that keeps on burning even after you blow it out, caused him to rupture one of his already lame lungs, while the cupcake was given to the cockroaches he kept in a container for one of his scientific experiments. Perhaps, she is not even looking for me? How could she possibly know where I am hiding? He leaned forward and resting his head on the computer keyboard to catch his breath he cried.

Redblood led Mona to the mouth of the cave, and said, "Here, here is where he is. Hitler's hiding in there."

"I'll go in by myself. It will look less suspicious," she said after climbing down off Mr. Grizzly Bear's back. She left her knapsack outside, since she no longer had a gun. She had never been able to find where Leonardo had hidden it.

It was dark and damp inside the cave, and every so often she would have to grope along the wet walls with her bare hand to feel her way forward. There were several tunnels leading in a dozen different directions, but a light flickering at the far end of one told her that was the tunnel to take.

She crept quietly into the chamber where Hitler was still hunched over his computer keyboard crying. The room was well lit. Mona imagined there was a generator somewhere in the place. Quite possibly, she thought, he gets his power from a waterfall?

Hitler had his back to her, so when he turned around she saw his face for the first time and it frightened her of all people. "Redblood was right," she said, "you certainly are ugly."

Redblood had told her all about Adolf's deformities caused from the contamination, about the "concentration camp" he'd created for insects, and about his fondness for killing God's little creatures.

"What do you want?" he demanded.

Mona noticed the laboratory to her left where white rats, guinea pigs, hamsters, and rabbits, were all kept in wire cages. "I'm a scientist," Hitler explained when he saw the brutal look in her brown eyes.

"Not anymore," Mona snapped.

One of the rabbits had a card on it's cage that said: CANCER. The guinea pigs had been

infected with the HIV virus that causes AIDS. The hamsters, in a hell all of their own, had been subjected to mass doses of radiation. The white rats were the only ones who had not been infected with anything, so far. Then Mona saw a glass container that was overcrowded with huge South American cockroaches. Hitler was breeding them trying to find the secret of their having survived for so long.

"HOW HORRIBLE," Mona remarked loudly in regards to the suffering she saw.

"What I do is none of your business. Why are you here? What do you want? Leave me alone. I know who you are. Get out. Get off my mountain. You're mad."

Mona was mad and at the moment she was about as dangerous as she has ever been. "Not to mention bald," Redblood, who was spying on them both, said to himself, "but then Hitler's head is also hairless," he added.

"Where is the bomb?" she demanded.

"None of your business," Hitler shouted.

"You had better tell me," she warned.

"If you must know you are standing on it."

"What do you mean?" she asked. She looked down at her feet and at the floor of the cave.

"The bomb is below. It's buried inside the mountain."

"If you're lying to me Hitler, I'll hang you upside down and let the rats feed on your face."

"I'm not. Why would I lie? Just leave me alone."

"How big is it?"

"How big is what?"

"How big is the bomb?"

"One million megatons," he stated with a massive amount of arrogance and a sinister smile that seemed to say, "Are you satisfied?"

"I am delighted," her smile seemed to be saying.

"It's a thermonuclear device," he added of his own accord.

Mona became very eager to know how it worked, but at the time she was not sure why. Her motives for wanting to know were as unclear as a cloud of smoke. "Explain it to me," she said.

"I will do no such thing."

"You will either tell me what I want to know, or I will torture you," she threatened.

"All right, the system is computer operated. The co- ordinance is already set. All I have to do is push a button. A baby could activate it."

"What button?"

"That button."

"Which one? There are so many?"

"That one over there."

"Where?"

He pointed impatiently towards the panel that was boggled down with buttons of various shapes and sizes.

"Show me precisely which one or I will feed you to the rats."

"THE RED ONE," he cried.

Mona studied the elaborate and complex computer, but she got lost just looking at the keyboard. "All you have to do is press this red button?" she asked.

"That's all folks," Hitler quipped, because even though he was forty years old his favorite television program, via the satellite dish that he had installed, was "the Bugs Bunny Road

Runner Show."

"Tell me how the device, the bomb, works," she ordered, for she was incredibly curious and her motive for wanting to know was no longer a mystery. It had to do with the removal of humankind, with the eradication of the human race.

"The trigger consists of a carefully fashioned, subcritical, spherical piece of plutonium, with a neutron-initiator device in its interior and a high explosive jacket surrounding..."

"Skip the scientific talk. Tell me how much damage can it do?"

"It's a very, very big bomb. The biggest ever built. And as any scientist worth his salt can tell you the only limits on such a bomb's destructive effect is the earth's capacity to absorb the blast," Hitler said, and when he spoke saliva came gushing out of his mouth like a geyser. The bigger the word the more saliva. At first Mona thought that he was spitting on her purposely, until she realized that drooling was another one of Adolf Hitler's defective disorders. These side effects, and his disfigured face, were something that even Mona was sympathetic towards particularly since they were caused by contaminants.

Right from the beginning Redblood knew that Hitler had built the bomb, and naturally he assumed that it was Hitler who was going to blow up the world, which is why he went all the way to Manhattan to warn Mona about what he believed to be the inevitable end of the world. But eavesdropping with Mr. Grizzly, just outside the chamber, he no longer knew what to believe. Mona was still standing by the computer. She was looking intently at a map of the world that Hitler had taped on the wall. Redblood cocked his head to one side, as he strained to hear the conversation that continued to confuse him. Why was Mona so interested in knowing how to detonate the bomb? She should be asking Hitler how to dismantle it, Redblood thought.

Now, Mona was looking at herself in a mirror. It was a small mirror that Hitler used for admiring his reflection. Over the years he had fooled himself into believing that he was not deformed at all. He was, he would like us all to believe, from another world. Lord knows, Redblood thought, he looks like an alien.

Mona, gazing at her reflection, was thinking that after all the murders she had committed in the course of her career as an environmental cold-blooded killer. After falling in and out of love with Feral. After becoming a prostitute. After a series of shock treatments in an insane asylum. After almost being murdered by the monk, nothing mattered to her anymore. Redblood had noticed the change in her as well. While making their way around the mountain he had mentioned something about the environment and the automobile industry. "Oh, what difference does it make?" Mona had said and from then on that seemed to be her favorite phrase when speaking about any subject under the sun, or about the sun itself. "What difference does it make? They are going to catch me eventually. Meanwhile we will never change the world. All my efforts for Mother Nature have been in vain," she said with a sigh that was full of self-pity; and it had broken Redblood's heart to hear her of all people talk that way.

Fed up with staring at her reflection in the mirror Mona closed her eyes. In doing so she tried to picture the planet as a perfect place. It was an impossible thing to do, for she realized that the only road to perfection would be a planet without people. "We are all doomed to die, anyhow, just like the Dinosaurs," she declared despondently upon opening her eyes. "There is evil in all of us. Adam and Eve made sure of it, and I am as wrongful as the rest of you." She thought about how screwed up society was and how it had shunned her even when she was a little girl. She remembered the meanness of Mrs. Manford. She thought about all the recorded cruelties in the history of the human race. "Shame on you," she said to society, and that's when Mona

Babcock made up her mind. She decided to detonate the bomb, but if it is any consolation, in regards to the upcoming catastrophe, there were tears in her eyes when she did so.

She had her back to Hitler when he picked up a piece of lead pipe. He tried to sneak up behind her, but she saw him in the mirror and spun around. He dropped the pipe, as though he had just pulled it out of a hot stove, for he was half her size and it would have been sheer stupidity on his part for him to hit her over the head like he had hoped. "If you push that button..." he started to say.

"When I push that button I will blow up the world," she said.

"But, wait, if you blow up the world you will kill us all?" Mona could not tell who was talking. It was not Hitler, for they were facing each other and she is sure that his mouth did not move. It sounded very much like Redblood, but it occurred to her that it could have been a character in her conscience complaining to her about the "bad karma" she was about to create for herself. Subsequently, however, she no longer cared.

"Life will return in some other form, but mankind will be gone forever," she said to the unrevealed voice.

Redblood, who was listening now more than ever, could not believe what he was hearing. He was all for ridding the world of the human race, but not with a nuclear bomb.

Hitler was wheezing when he said, "You are mad. You are insane. For the sake of the unborn, the most innocent of us all, control your aggression."

"Hitler, you are the one who built the bomb?"

"I did not build it to murder mankind," he cried, though on several occasions the thought had certainly crossed his mind. His original and remaining goal, however, was to promote world peace. Of course he also saw himself sitting on a throne as supreme ruler of the world one day.

"Then why did you build it, if not for destruction, if not to use? Don't tell me you built it as a deterrent?"

"I built it because I could. I built it to black mail the world into peace. My plan was to promote total disarmament. To put an end to pollution. I was going to hold all the countries of the world hostage and make them abide by my laws. Pollution killed my parents. I am a progeny of pollution. A freak of nature."

Mona scoffed at Hitler's heartfelt confession. "Are you trying to tell me that you are a good person? What about your fondness for killing?"

"I haven't done that for years. I admit when I was young I was filled with rage. An obsessive compulsive, perhaps, and I admit to using animals for research now, but I am very close to finding a cure for several deadly diseases. I am a scientist," he stated, and then he tried his best to stop her. He even picked up the lead pipe and attempted to hit her over the head, but Mona just plucked it out of his hand and hurled it away. "Mr. Grizzly Bear," she called, and she was surprised that he came as quickly as he did, not nearly as surprised as Hitler was when he saw the thousand pound carnivore come into the cave.

"No, no, no," Hitler cried in terror when he saw the growling grizzly come charging into the chamber. He fainted and fell onto the container that was full of cockroaches. It crashed to the floor of the cave next to an unconscious Adolf Hitler - who was unaware that the huge South American cockroaches had escaped and were crawling all over him.

"Never mind, Mr. Grizzly," Mona said, for she decided that the little man was harmless lying there.

Redblood swooped into the chamber just then to tell Mona that an army of men were coming

up the mountain. "They're going to arrest you," he quorked. "We must leave at once. They're going to take you back."

"OH NO THEY'RE NOT," she shouted, as she stepped up to the computer. Looking through the periscope she scanned the mountain side. Redblood was right there were several policeman making their way through the woods. She was even more amazed to see Dr. Fleshman amongst the men. Then she spotted Ozone Layer trailing behind, and finally, Feral. "What is Feral doing here?" she wondered out loud. "Am I dreaming?" she asked herself, yet she knew that this was no dream. She knew that very soon they would all be at the entrance of the cave. She could not wait. She would not wait. She would end the world. She would end it her way. She would end it with a bang. She would end it NOW.

At the computer she paused. Picturing herself pushing the button that would blow up the bomb that would end all life on earth she began to wail like a wild banshee. It was her way of warning the world that she was mad, not insane, but pissed off with "PEOPLE," she screamed. "YOU PARASITES. I LOATHE EVERY LAST ONE OF YOU. DO LIFE A FAVOR AND GET OFF THE FACE OF THE EARTH BEFORE IT'S TOO LATE. LEAVE THE PLANET AND TAKE YOUR POLLUTANTS WITH YOU. LEAVE THE LAND ALONE. IT DOES NOT BELONG TO ANYONE. STOP, GOING TO WAR OVER PIECES OF PROPERTY THAT YOU DO NOT OWN TO BEGIN WITH. YOU ARE GUESTS ON THIS GREAT GREEN EARTH, SO PACK YOUR BAGS, YOU INGRATES, AND PREPARE TO DIE...NOW!"

She had just put her finger on the button in question when Adolph Hitler regained consciousness. Lying on the floor of the cave, with a cockroach crawling up his crooked little, the first thing he saw, upon opening his eyes, was his pistol taped to the underside of the table where the white rats were. He looked across the room towards the Babcock woman. She was facing the computer, but even though her back was to him he could see that her finger was on the red button.

He pulled the pistol free, while Mona was in the midst of shouting: "...MANKIND, INSECTS ARE MORE SIGNIFICANT THAN YOU, AND I AM YOUR EXTERMINATOR!"

Hitler was too weak to stand and furthermore there was no time, so he pointed the pistol from the floor. "Saints can become sinners, and sinners can become saints," he said to himself seconds before he pulled the trigger and then he lost consciousness again before he even saw where the bullet went.

A shrill sounding siren was set off inside the mountain, because unfortunately for man and woman kind, Mona had pressed the button at approximately the same instant the bullet went into her back. She fell forward onto the keyboard, but she forced herself to stand in a spectacular display of inner strength and stamina. There was blood pouring from her chest. The bullet had gone right through her. Only one inch away from her heart it had left a wound that was wide open. "Redblood," she cried, "help me." As she turned around to look for Redblood she saw the gun in Hitler's hand. His eyes were closed and there was a cockroach sitting on the side of his disfigured face. But Redblood was gone and so was Mr. Grizzly.

When the mountain started to shake sections of the ceiling came crashing down. She did not want to die inside the cave. Suddenly, with death pounding so fiercely upon her door, it would seem she did not want to die at all. Leaving a trail of blood through the tunnel she staggered outside into the sunlight.

Holding her hand over the hole in her chest she called once more for Redblood, but he did

not come. She looked up at the sky and staring directly into the midday sun she said, "Soon, it will all be over."

The mountain was vibrating vehemently. A boulder as big as a Buick rolled right by her. Then on a branch behind her she was startled to see Redblood. He had his mouth open wide and his pink tongue was showing. "Redblood," she cried, "help me. I've been shot." As the mountain continued to quake and rocks continued to roll she wondered how long it would be before the bomb blew? She had forgotten to ask Hitler. Regretfully, she realized that Redblood was not responding. She was not even sure if it was Redblood or any other raven? Furthermore, she did not know what the bird was thinking, and the tree that he was perched in did not talk to her either. In fact, none of the trees around her were communicating. And where have the policemen gone, and Dr. Fleshman, and Ozone Layer, and Feral, and Mr. Grizzly? She looked at Redblood again, but now there were two birds and she could not tell them apart. She thought that perhaps she was seeing double, so she rubbed her eyes, but when she looked again there were three ravens perched in the tree. And she was positive that the hatred in their black eyes was directed towards her. "Redblood, is that you? What's the matter? Why are you angry? Talk to me. It was the only way to get rid of..." But Redblood did not reply. Instead he began calling to his own kind and soon the ruckus he was making recruited another raven, and then another, and another, and yet another, until the trees were overrun with ravens.

Mona, sensing something very big behind her, turned around and saw Mr. Grizzly, who was no longer friendly. He was a thousand pounds of pure ferociousness. Another rustling in the bushes caused her to jump, as Mrs. Mountain Lion came barrelling through the underbrush. She too was no longer a purring playmate. She was a wild carnivorous cat quite capable of killing Mona in an instant.

As more and more ravens appeared in the sky a dark shadow covered the ground. The birds were so abundant they were blocking the sun. And soon the forest all around Mona was filled with a massive congregation of the scavengers.

The mountain lion was the first to attack. Leaping through the air she landed atop of Mona. She could have clawed her to pieces, or she could have sunk her teeth into any part of her torso and torn her in two, but after only one rake of her claws she left Mona lying on the ground for the grizzly bear. His savagery was unmatched and the paw that struck the side of her face was powerful enough to kill a moose, not to mention a mere Mona.

On the brink of death she was just conscious enough to see all the animals in the forest were surrounding her. They hooted and howled and hissed and growled and snapped and snarled, but she was no longer an entrepreneur of their language. She was as illiterate as the rest of the human race.

In vengeance Redblood swooped down upon her. Then the rest of the ravens followed his lead. She lived just long enough to see herself buried beneath the embodiment of black birds. They pecked at her with their beaks. They ripped away at her face with their talons, even though it had already been torn apart. She tried to fight them off, but in her condition one would have been too many and there were hundreds and hundreds of them.

After she died Redblood, the leader, plucked out her eyes and he ate them like an appetizer prior to feasting upon her flesh with the rest of the flock.

Long after the ravens had had their fill, her decaying corpse was dinner for an army of angry ants, for a million or more maggots, for a wide variety of worms, for a century of centipedes, for a swarm of flies, and then finally after this bevy of bugs had had their fill Mona's remains were

found by a totally different type of parasitic insect weighing approximately two hundred pounds; a mountain ranger stumbled upon her bones and the diary in her knapsack told him the importance of his discovery.

The Woman from Raven Rock is a best seller in book stores all across the country, but even though there are several million copies in circulation Rebecca has just finished reading "Redblood's Revenge."

"What about the bomb?" she simply has to ask.

"There was no bomb," Raven tells her. "Hitler was bluffing. He could never get his hands on enough plutonium."

"Well, what about Ozone Layer, Dr. Fleshman, Feral, and all the others coming up the mountain? What happened to them? Did they just disappear?"

"Of course not, they were figments of Mona's mad imagination," Raven explains.

"But, Redblood told her the men were coming?"

"Redblood tried to trick her. He lied, because he did not want her to push the button, and because in the end she was crazy she was convinced she saw them."

"So the mountain never shook?"

"Only in Mona's mind."

After discussing it in detail Raven and Rebecca decide to invite all of their old friends from Raven Rock to New York for a party they are having to celebrate the success of the book.

Bachelor Buck and Mr. Bear receive Raven's telegram and go directly to Mr. Otter's house, where the three of them carry on an animated conversation.

"Raven is throwing a dinner party at his apartment in New York City," says Mr. Bear. "And guess what? We're all invited."

"He's chartered a plane to take us there," gushes Bachelor Buck. "And guess what else? There will be humans at the party."

"Oh really," replies Mr. Otter. "Sounds wonderful. When do we leave?"

"The day after tomorrow. Now we must go tell Rabbit and Ruth and the rest of the animals."

As happy as Raven is about the success of his novel (and his new found fame) he is not at all pleased about the book's poor impact on people. "They are still polluting the planet," he complains to Rebecca, to his editor, and to anyone else who will listen. Daily he is disgusted by the damage that is being done all around the world. "People are as unenlightened as ever," he adds. "The promotion of a pollution free planet was my main reason for writing the book, not a Pulitzer Prize. I was hoping the world would put a ban on pollution."

"Did you really expect them to stop?" Rebecca asks.

"Yes, I did," Raven replies, "but the humans are still driving their motor cars. Contamination is still escaping from factories all across the country. Acid rain is still eating away at the earth. The hole in the ozone layer is getting larger every day. Forests from the Amazon to Zimbabwe are still being cut down at an alarming rate. And what is worse we still have nuclear weapons

the world over."

From his vantage point, his balcony overlooking the likes of New York City, it saddens him to see that nothing has changed for the better. The Hudson river is still brown, and it probably always will be. He wonders how many other rivers in the world are flowing with toxic waste instead of water?

Holding his copy of *The Woman from Raven Rock*, along with the royalty check that he has just received, Raven's eyesight becomes cloudy, (as he looks at the picture of Puff on the front cover) for there are tears in his eyes. "The first of many," he can remember his publisher telling him, in regards to the royalty check and not to the tears in his eyes - which have come about because he can clearly hear the humming of his air conditioner inside of his plush apartment. Indeed, it is a muggy day in New York City.

"Well, the party is tonight, so you had better cheer up old bird, pollution or no pollution," he says to himself, as somebody below blows their car horn at a pedestrian carelessly crossing the road.

At the party there are reporters looking for a scoop. They snap one picture after another of "the bird who wrote the book," while the publisher, who is responsible for the release of Raven's novel, stands up in the middle of the room and with a glass of champagne in his hand he says, "A toast, to the writer from Raven Rock."

"TO THE WRITER FROM RAVEN ROCK," everyone cheers.

"Speech. Speech. Speech."

Raven looks at the crowd of people that have gathered into a group. He thanks them all for coming. He talks about how afraid he is for the environment, until a flash bulb goes off in his face. Taken aback, he turns abruptly towards his animal friends, who are staying amongst themselves on one side of the living room. To them, he says with the utmost sincerity: "It is very, very good to see you all again. I'm glad you came. I want you to know that if it was not for your help and inspiration I would never have been able to write the book. Thank you for coming. Thank you for your distinctive qualities. And from the bottom of this bird's heart I thank you for simply being."

Rebecca spends most of the evening by her husband's side and she is wearing what one critic calls "a ghastly and God awful gossamer evening gown."

Raven is furious the following day when he reads the remark in the New York Times. "Rebecca is a beautiful bird," he complains to his publisher.

"Try not to be offended, my feathered friend. It's the price you pay for fame."

"Mr. Raven. Mr. Raven. Will you be writing another novel?" some very persistent newspaper man who crashed the party wants to know, and he is not the only one eager for an answer. Everyone wants to know. Even Rebecca has her reasons, so she waits for his response with the rest of the room.

"If there is time," Raven replies enigmatically.

Gulping down a glass of fruit punch Mr. Bear is approaching drunkenness when he says, "Well, Bachelor Buck, I suppose we should mingle."

Sea Gull, who is mingling, asks them if they have seen Sally. "I saw her go into the kitchen a while ago with Rebecca," replies Mr. Bear.

"No, no, I saw her slip out onto the balcony with Ms. Swan," Bachelor Buck slurs, because he is already drunk.

Sea Gull is not sure who to believe. He checks both places, but Sally is not to be found in

either. In one of the bedrooms, however, he finds her talking to Rebecca. "I was sorry to hear about Radcliff," Sally is saying when Sea Gull enters the room. "It must have been very hard on both of you?" she adds. It is Radcliff's room that they are in where more than just memories remain. His records, his text books from school, his clothes, and his pamphlets for university are just a few of the many reminders that Rebecca is reluctant to get rid of.

"I'm sorry to disturb you, Rebecca, but the humans are leaving," Sea Gull says and then he returns to the living room.

The party becomes a lot livelier after the humans have gone. The loud music lures one animal after another into the center of the living room where they begin to dance. The blinking black strobe lights on the ceiling make the living room look like a New York nightclub. Bachelor Buck, wearing a pair of four-legged bell bottoms, and Mr. Bear, wearing a bandanna and love beads, bump and grind together on and off the dance floor. "After all, this is New York City," they shout in unison.

When Rabbit and Ruth finally arrive they hop around the room, for it seems that they are right into the rap music that is presently being played.

"What took you two so long to get here? We were all beginning to worry," Raven says.

"We got separated at the airport from the other animals and they left without us," Ruth says.

"Then we got lost," Rabbit explains.

"We ended up taking a tour of the city by taxi," Ruth adds.

"It's a treacherous town for tourists," Rabbit tells Raven, who at the moment is being summoned by Mr. Otter.

There is a loud knock on the door and Raven thinks for sure it is his next door neighbor complaining about the noise. "Someone's at the door," Rabbit hollers, as he is pouring himself a glass of champagne. He runs to answer it when he sees that Rebecca is busy carrying a tray full of dirty dishes into the kitchen, and Raven is caught in a corner with Mr. Otter, Mr. Wolf, and Mr. Owl. They are discussing politics. "Who was it who said that democracy is just a wolf disguised as a lamb?" Mr. Otter asks.

"I have no idea," replies Mr. Wolf indignantly. "It certainly wasn't me."

"The only way communism will work would be if the whole world was one communist country with one enlightened leader like the Lord Jesus Christ," Raven tells them, but he does not hear the objections of Mr. Owl, who is too pragmatic to put much faith in the improbable. Raven is much more interested in the woman who has just walked into the apartment than in anything Mr. Owl has to say. Furthermore, he is the first to recognize her. The long blond hair. The beautiful face. The full voluptuous figure. Those big brown eyes. The Mona Lisa like smile.

It is Mona Babcock as ravishing as she looked in the beginning of the book, but how, how can it be? Raven wonders. I molded her from my imagination? She is a character that I created in a book and nothing more? A fictional femme fatal? A fabrication through and through?

It dawns on several of the animals who the woman really is just by the way she walks into the room. She stops center stage under a blinking black strobe light, and says, "HELLO, RAVEN," with the same sultry voice that Raven always envisioned Mona to have. She is not Mona, however, she is Mother Nature, and Raven will bet the rest of his royalty checks that she is MAD.

"She's come to kill us all," Mr. Squirrel screams, and he is, in fact, the first to faint. Ruth collapses right after him, while Rebecca drops the dirty dishes she is holding onto the living room floor.

"Horror of horrors," someone shouts, for it is actually unheard of in history for Mother Nature to take on the form of a human being, and every animal in the room is dumfounded indeed. They did not know it could be done, but sure enough she is standing there defiantly in the fleshly form of Mona Babcock.

"Better her than a Tyrannosaurus rex," supposes the same someone who shouted, "Horror of horrors."

"She doesn't do dinosaurs," someone else says.

"I didn't think she could do humans," Raven replies under his breath.

Mona Babcock raises her arm and everyone in the room who has read *The Woman from Raven Rock*, which is the vast majority of those present, holds their breath, for they believe she has a gun, but she just brushes her hair back.

Mr. Squirrel, who is passed out in the punch bowl is on the verge of drowning, so Mr. Bear fishes him out and then refills his glass. Rabbit flees from the room, right after opening the door, because he read the book and he thought it really was the Babcock woman come from the pages in some prophetic mystical way to butcher each and everyone of them. Mr. Otter and Mr. Wolf, the only two who have not read the book, presume she is a party crasher, so they continue calmly on with their conversation about communism. Sally is not sure what to think, so she chooses not to by lighting a cigarette. Sea Gull, who is standing by the stereo, has in a very short time become too intoxicated to care, but he does manage to turn the music down when Raven signals for him to do so. Sinéad O'Connor, just happens to be singing: "... does anybody wanna drink before the war ...?" And Mother Nature looking like the lovely Mona Babcock makes the following announcement:

"I AM HERE AS A HUMAN BEING, BECAUSE I WANT A BIRD'S EYE VIEW OF THE UPCOMING CATASTROPHE."

Raven, trembling all over, is the only animal in the room who knows what she is talking about, for while he was writing the final chapter of *The Woman from Raven Rock* he had had a premonition that what he was writing about was really going to happen. He had hoped he was wrong, but now after hearing Mother Nature's proclamation he knows he was right and that regrettably the worst was yet to come.

FRENZY: THE FINAL CHILLING CHAPTER

The sun, rising slowly up the mountain side the morning after Mona's murder, looked like a giant red rose. And since Adolph Hitler had been bluffing about the bomb it was also a peaceful sunrise for all of humankind. He had never been able to get his hideous hands on enough plutonium, which is why he was crying on his computer keyboard when Mona came into the cave. How could he black mail the world into peace and into putting an end to pollution when

he was completely without power.

Not long after shooting Mona Babcock in the back he had regained consciousness and with the gun in his hand he had gone outside whereupon he had seen the animals tear his tormentor to pieces. Wheezing all the way back into the cave once inside he raised the World War II pistol to his temple and like his name sake he pulled the trigger.

"Hitler might have been bluffing, but the final curtain call did come and it came from out of the blue," claimed one of the South American cockroaches that had crawled inside the computer.

And for Feral, who had always been afraid to fly, it was a doubly frightening experience. He was several thousand feet in the air when it happened. Divorced from Jane, he was on his way to the funeral in Raven Rock to say a proper good-bye. Jane (they were still friends) had actually urged him to go. "Mona had such a tumultuous life. Maybe now she will rest in peace? So let us be big enough to let bygones be bygones," Jane said, and then she picked up the phone to make reservations for her ex-husband on the next available flight.

It was at the airport in Los Angeles during an unscheduled stop over that he had seen Ozone Layer. He remembered him from the courtroom. "Isn't that Mona's lawyer?" he had asked himself, as they both boarded the same plane bound for the west coast of Washington State.

Ozone was also on his way to Mona's funeral, for not only had he always found her fascinating and friendly in an environmental mode, he had fallen in love with her long ago.

On the plane Feral forced himself to confront his feelings for Mona. On one hand he had loved her, but on the other hand he had hated her. He had always been ambivalent about her and at the time of their affair he had been so afraid of falling in love all he could do was leave. He was largely afraid of the love that she had had for him, so he had decided that his best bet was to go back to Jane. He had never really loved Jane. They were good friends and when he was with her his feet were firmly rooted on the ground. Jane was a level headed woman. Being with Mona, however, was like falling off a cliff every five minutes. Where Jane was sane, Mona was mad, where Jane was plain, Mona was gorgeous, where Jane was safe and life with her was serene, Mona was dangerous and life with her was a neverending roller coaster ride. Mona was every man's dream and every man's worst nightmare. A woman of mystery and romance is how he remembered her. A woman who had made the mistake of loving him too much, and for too long he had been told. Mona had loved him, he liked to imagine with his overgrown male ego, more than any woman has ever loved a man. But fate and Feral had joined forces and had hurled her horrendously against a wall of wishful thinking, which she had not been able to withstand. Like the windshields of their cars when they crashed something inside of Mona had shattered. She had fallen to pieces when Feral did not show up for the wedding and she was never the same woman again. Sadly, she had spent the rest of her life lonely and in search of someone to love, but the closet she came to finding anyone (according to the diary the police found on the mountain top) was a monk who tried to murder her. But she was bitter long before falling in love with Leonardo. He was just the last in a long line of disappointments, Feral was fully convinced, for his thoughts turned towards the treacherous woman he had seen stand trial. A woman supposedly obsessed with saving the world. A woman well on her way to becoming "the madwoman" that everyone had always accused her of being. There was a time, prior to the trial, when Feral had wondered if it might be possible for them to pick up the pieces of their passion, but that was before he found out that Frenzy was a fetus floating in a jar and that Mona was a mass murderess. Regardless, as he closed his eyes on the plane, it was not hard for him to recall how brave and beautiful Mona Babcock had been in the beginning. In fact, he was remembering

the first time they made love - when it happened. He was allowing himself the luxury of thinking about her voluptuous figure and her long blond hair - when the hell began.

"Here it comes. Here comes the holocaust. Hip hip hooray. Here go the humans," a cockroach from California, who was hiding in the cockpit of the plane, said to his female companion.

Feral was not the only one frightened by the explosion that rocked the entire plane, nor was he the only one screaming involuntarily. The "fasten your seat belt" sign came on just as a brilliant flash of white light filled the sky. The pilot and several of the passengers were blinded instantly. The co-pilot was in the washroom, wiping his you know what, when it happened. Feral was sitting in an aisle seat and fortunately he had been looking down at the floor; while the woman sitting next to him by the window was not so fortunate. "I can't see," she cried. "I can't see anything."

Ozone Layer had seen the light, but luckily and strangely enough he did not lose his vision. You might say his pale blue eyes were immune for some mysterious reason, but more likely he was wearing his expensive pair of solar resistant sunglasses. He was also sitting by a window, so himself (and the passengers who still had their eyesight) were the first to see the forming of the mushroom shaped cloud below.

"This is your co-pilot speaking. Please remain calm. I have been informed that the turbulence we are experiencing is being caused by nuclear explosions in Los Angeles. We have, however, just lost touch with the main tower. At the moment there is no where in the immediate vicinity for us to land. Do not be alarmed. We are continuing on course up the coast to San Francisco."

Feral saw Ozone Layer sitting by himself, so he jumped up and went towards the back of the plane. The stewardess did not see him walking down the aisle or else she would have told him to stay seated. She was far too busy informing the frenzied passengers what to do in case of an emergency landing.

Feral took the empty seat beside Ozone. The two men looked at each other briefly, but they did not speak. At first their eyes were their only form of communication.

My God, Feral thought, they're so blue. But, he looks much older and thinner than he did in court.

That boy has a familiar face, Ozone thought, and then both of their thoughts returned to the predicament they were in and to more private matters.

Feral was wondering WHY? Mrs. Hitler, who had asked herself the same question over and over again during her lifetime, could have told him why had she not been in another dimension looking down.

Ozone Layer, older and wiser and far more cynical than Feral, knew the answer as well. The only question that he had ever wondered about, in regards to the end of the world, was WHEN? Of course now he knew the answer was NOW.

Feral kept on wondering WHY? WHY is the world at WAR? WHY is there so much hate in the human heart? WHY do humans have to hurt other humans? WHY did WE build these bombs to begin with? Maybe Mona, as mad as she was, was right when she testified: "We many not eat each other, but in many ways we are the most primitive species on the planet." But, WHY Feral wanted to know, and he wanted to know NOW, largely because there was going to be no later.

An angry looking Ozone Layer tapped him on the arm and told him to look out the window at some city that was besieged by fire, but Feral did not want to see the suffering. He did not

want to see the stupidity. Being a firefighter, he did not want to witness a fire that would burn forever. Frankly, he did not want to see the end.

So Feral found himself, strangely enough, fantasizing about Frenzy. Frenzy Forrester would have been a young boy by now, but thanks to the selfish stupidity of his parents he was an inch long fetus without a face floating in a jar of formaldehyde. Actually, Frenzy was in the Pacific ocean, for Pandora (upon finding the jar in her kitchen cupboard) had flushed him down the toilet.

Suddenly, for the first time since finding out about the abortion Feral was thankful for Mona's refusal to bring a baby into this world. He had no idea that his son's final resting place was the Pacific ocean, but Feral believed he was better off never having been born, and he came to the conclusion that because of all the parents in the world future generations now had no chance. Not only would they have no inhabitable earth there will be no people to procreate, so the children were doomed to death before ever being born. In his opinion, the bombs below were performing one big bloody abortion.

As nuclear weapons continued to abort the human race the plane was rocked by another tremendous explosion that brought Feral out of his reverie in an instant. The co-pilot said bombs were being detonated in the San Francisco Bay area. He was also forced to say, "There is no where for us to land. Cities are being systematically destroyed. We are increasing our altitude to forty thousand feet. We are going to fly out over the Pacific ocean." Some of the passengers panicked. Some of them prayed. One passenger in particular peed his pants, but it was to be expected being that he was very nearly a newborn.

"There was nothing that anyone could do," a cockroach from Canada claimed when the catastrophe struck his country.

"The humans were helpless. All they could do was hold onto their hats. Watch for the missiles to go by and wait for their turn," said a cockroach from the Russian republic.

"Well, it's no wonder at the time there were over fifty thousand nuclear warheads in the world," a cockroach living in London, England said with a British accent.

"It was inevitable," a cockroach from a small communist country claimed.

"I don't know why it came as such a surprise to the people on the planet?" said yet another communist cockroach from China.

Ozone Layer stared out his window with wonder watching a war that he always knew would happen one day. He turned to Feral and spoke for the first time. "Ever since World War II when we invented the hydrogen bomb we've been on the brink of extinction," he stated. And now a wide eyed witness to the mother of all wars, Ozone realized it was not even a war it was just the end of the world. The destruction of the human race by the hands of the human race. "How sad," he said to himself and as he stared at the smoke filled sky his big blue eyes blinked back a truckload of tears.

"The plane will run out of fuel and we'll plunge into the Pacific ocean," Feral said to Ozone.

"Don't feel bad, my boy, I'm sure we're not the only plane in the world to have taken refuge in the sky?"

Feral had always had a fantasy (ever since he was a little boy being forced from one foster home into another) that one day a wave would wash over the world. A wave so vast and wonderful it would wipe out all the woes in the world. Violence and corruption would become a thing of the past. Crimes would no longer be committed, for there would be no need for them in a perfect world. Mankind would know no misery, for there would be no more pain in a perfect

world. There would be no more mayhem, no more madness, no more money, no more Mona's, and last but not least NO MORE NUCLEAR WEAPONS. Layer after layer after layer of love would be lavished on every living life form. Every conceivable creature in existence would be filled with love and would live with each other in perfect harmony. Happiness would be handed out to the unhappy. Joy would rule the world. But, Feral forgot his dream by the time he was a full grown man, and Feral F. Forrester was one very frightened soul when he fell with the plane forty thousand feet into the Pacific ocean. Ozone Layer, sitting next to him, died of heart failure during the fall and only seconds before he was disintegrated in the explosion. The rain that fell was radio- active; as were the waves that washed over the wreckage of the plane. The California cockroaches, clinging to a piece of the cockpit, said, "Surely, we are the only survivors."

Rebecca is watching her favorite soap opera "Another World" and soon she will wish she were on one. New York City is hit by one megaton missile after another. The first one fired flattens every building of midtown Manhattan within an area of sixty square miles. Others follow every few minutes until eventually all of New York is annihilated.

Rabbit, Ruth, Bachelor Buck, Mr. Bear, Sea Gull, Sally, and all the rest of the animals are returning to Raven Rock. At Kennedy International Airport they are waiting for the flight that they will never board.

Mother Nature is sitting out on the balcony of Raven and Rebecca's apartment. She has not spoken a single word since her announcement at the party, and she becomes vexed as she thinks about all the work she has done in vain and all the hopes she had had for the human race. Watching the sky with knowing eyes she waits.

Raven is already working on another novel. He does not know yet what the book will be about. It is all very vague. On top of that he is having trouble concentrating today as he works on his computer; a foreboding feeling he has that he will never finish the new novel is the reason. Furthermore, for some reason all the characters that he has created so far are cockroaches and it seems he has no control over the conversation they are having within the confines of his new novel:

"Scientists have said that they are not sure what the consequences will be if a full scale nuclear holocaust should ever occur? Well, now they know, but of course they are no longer alive to tell the tragic tale. No one is," snickered Mr. Cockroach.

"Scientists have also stated that we are the only species certain to survive a hellish holocaust," boasted another cockroach.

"And they were right," said yet another.

"I can tell you," said a pregnant Mrs. Cockroach, "that pandemonium prevailed. Dark skies covered much of the earth. The sunlight was blocked by huge clouds of thick smoke caused from

the numerous nuclear ignited fires. All over the globe the temperatures dropped drastically. The rain was radio-active. Black soot, dust, debris, and ash fell for several hours after each initial explosion. Ghastly global fallout killed the few remaining Homo Sapiens, not to mention every other species of plant and animal. The blast from each bomb caused dramatic depletions in the ozone layer and eventually it disintegrated to an alarming degree. Nuclear fireballs engulfed the globe. Tons of toxic soot and smoke escaped from the cities the world over that were besieged by fire. Shock waves seconds after the detonations caused fireballs to rise rapidly upwards and a brilliant flash of light that lasted for only a few short seconds after each explosion blinded everyone unfortunate enough to see them, but they were already doomed to die."

"Do you have any idea how it started?" a young cockroach asked, as he crawled across the floor of the oval office. The White House in Washington, D.C. was one of the few structures still standing in what the cockroaches called, "The Wasteland."

"It's hard to say, and it's pointless to ponder the various possibilities," the newly elected President of the Cockroach Republic replied from his swivel chair, "because, the people who started it have perished."

One minute before New York was annihilated and Raven's apartment building was engulfed in a fireball he had turned his computer on and wrote: Once upon a time...

EPILOGUE: THE AFTERLIFE

Rain storms were Mona's favorite act of Mother Nature, but they were also a constant reminder of the car crash her and Feral had experienced that fateful evening. And it was raining the night that Dr. Fleshman came into her room at the madhouse to inform her about Feral's untimely death.

"I'm afraid he's been killed in a forest fire," Dr. Fleshman had taken immense pleasure in telling her, while Nurse Nightmare tried to hide the hypodermic needle she was holding.

"Now, don't let this news upset you," said Dr. Fleshman. "I don't want anything to hinder the progress we've made on your recovery."

"Recover from this, you creep," Mona said and then she walloped him as hard as she could with her bare hand, but before she could do any real damage she was drugged by Nurse Nightmare, who found great joy in jabbing the needle into Mona's side.

Upon awakening the next day she was not upset by the news, for her beliefs about life after death and reincarnation were as strong as ever. Also she had accepted the fact that, in this lifetime at least, her and Feral had no future together. Moreover, she was positive they would meet again, for not long after seeing Feral's blinding headlights on the highway that night she had seen another light. After their cars crashed, and after hitting her head on the dash board the way she had done, she had floated through a dark tunnel towards a brilliant white light. The closer she came to the light the more love she felt, for there were two vaguely familiar figures standing in the light at the end of the dark tunnel. Her smiling parents, George and Grace

Babcock, were waiting for her. "Go back. It is not your time," they told her, so she had drifted obediently back into her body, even though at the time she was eager to stay in the spirit world. When she awoke in the hospital the doctor was telling her how lucky she was to be alive. She did not feel lucky at all. Yet, she never told anyone about her beautiful out of body experience.

Feral did not die in a forest fire as Dr. Fleshman would have liked for her to believe. He died when the plane he was on fell forty thousand feet into the ocean. He had, however, gone to visit Mona in the madhouse right after his divorce from Jane. He talked with Dr. Fleshman first and he had given the good doctor permission to tell Mona he was dead. "I believe it is for the best. It is the only way. She has an obsession for you that we can not cure," Dr. Fleshman, a short fat little man with birdlike eyes, informed Feral.

"Well, if you feel it will help her?" Feral replied uncertainly.

"I do indeed. Now, is there any particular way that you would like for me to tell her of your departure? You're a fire fighter, so perhaps I could say that you died in a fire?"

"A forest fire," Feral had suggested, and then he had left the hospital without ever seeing Mona.

"I still don't understand why they told you he was dead?" Ozone Layer had asked her a few weeks later.

"I guess the bastards thought it would help me get the man out of my system," Mona told him. This was Ozone Layer's last visit before her escape and subsequently it would be the last time, in this life, that she would ever see him.

"You haven't said how you found out Feral is still alive?"

"The plant in the warden's office told me about a conversation he overheard. Apparently, the part about the forest fire was Feral's idea."

"Fire was the first evolutionary step that separated man from the animals," Ozone said.

They were sitting outside. The visiting hours were almost over. "Well, he cared enough to come and that counts for something. It's not his fault Dr. Fleshman talked him into trying to fool me," Mona commented. "It's funny though, I don't love him anymore. And I forgive him for everything. But, I knew he wasn't dead even before the plant told me."

"How?"

"If he had died I'm sure I would have been able to feel his spirit."

"I don't believe in life after death," Ozone told her. "Why if everyone on the planet were to die all at once where would all five billion of us go? To another world? And what would we do in heaven, anyhow? Fight like we did on earth? Is God going to be a referee? I think this is the only world we've got or will ever get."

"Well, if that's true, Ozone, we should start taking better care of it," Mona replied, and even though she knew there was an afterlife of some sort, she realized Ozone Layer was right. This is the only life we're guaranteed. And what a life, she thought. Only an hour ago the inmates in the madhouse had teased her in the so called cafeteria by calling her "Mona the Muffin Eater," which brought back bitter memories of Manderson, the prosecutor, who had asked her over and over and over again. "Now, Miss Babcock, explain to the court, if you can, why do snakes eat frogs? Why do frogs eat flies? Why do bears eat fish?"

"I guess because they're hungry. What's your point, you pin head?"

"My point is, if animals eat other animals why shouldn't man?"

"Man is omnivorous," Mona had snarled. "Which means he can choose between eating a cob of corn or a cow. And since he is supposed to be the most intelligent species he should be able to

see the difference. Just because a lion kills another animal for food is no reason for man to rationalize his doing the same. The lion has no choice. His survival depends upon his eating meat, but man's does not. The lion can not reason. The lion is not enlightened. The lion is allowed, and the lion does not make it's prey suffer first in a factory farm. So stop using the survival of other species as an excuse for EATING AN ANIMAL."

"Ozone."

"What is it Mona?"

"I've been reading the Bible..."

"I didn't know you were religious?"

"I'm not really, but it's one of the few books that Dr. Fleshman will let me have, and in Genesis chapter one God says "I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food."

"Whatever the good Lord meant when he said "Man shall have dominion over the animals I'm sure He or She did not intend for us to treat them the way we do," he replied, and then Ozone Layer rose to his feet on that final day. "It's time for me to leave," he said. "Visiting hours are almost over. One question, my dear, before I go? Why is it all so important to you personally?"

"BECAUSE," Mona screamed, and she had screamed it sorrowfully, "I LOVE MY FELLOW MAN, BUT IF HE DOES NOT STOP IT WILL BE..." she blinked, for the sun had come out from behind a big black cloud, "THE END."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR AND HIS EGO

Johnathan Crimson Clover-Cook is seen leaving a costume shop surreptitiously. Later that same evening the flamboyantly famous novelist is spotted by a photographer entering a trendy nightclub in New York City (just moments before Madonna) dressed as a giant cockroach...